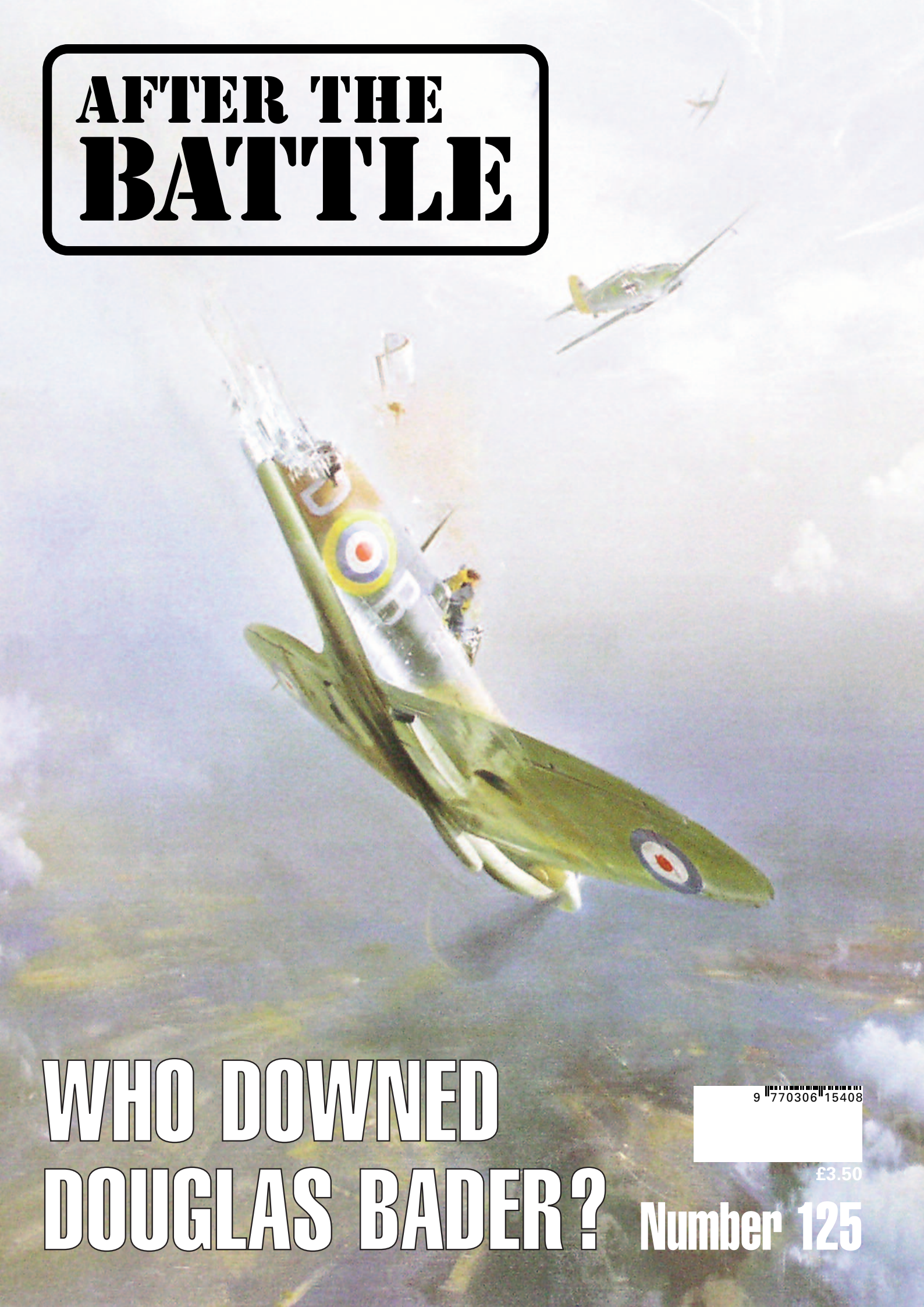
AFTER THE BATTLE



WHO DOWNED DOUGLAS BADER?

9 770306 15408

£3.50

Number 125

NUMBER 125

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Editor-in-Chief: Winston G. Ramsey

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Published by
Battle of Britain International Ltd.,
Church House, Church Street,
London E15 3JA, England

Telephone: (020) 8534 8833

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E-mail: hq@afterthebattle.com

Website: www.afterthebattle.com

Printed in Great Britain by
Trafford Print Colour Ltd.,
Shaw Wood Way, Doncaster DN2 5TB.

After the Battle is published on the 15th of February, May, August and November.

United Kingdom Newsagent Distribution:
Lakeside Publishing Services Ltd, Unit 1D,
Tideway Industrial Estate, Kirtling Street,
London SW8 5BP

United States Distribution and Subscriptions:
RZM Imports, PO Box 995, Southbury, CT, 06488
Telephone: 1-203-264-0774
Toll Free: 1-800-562-7308
Website: www.rzm.com
1 Year subscription (4 issues) $35.00

Canadian Distribution and Subscriptions:
Vanwell Publishing Ltd., PO Box 2131,
1 Northrup Crescent,
St. Catharines, Ontario L2R 7S2.
Telephone: (905) 937 3100 Fax: (905) 937 1760
Toll Free: 1-800-661-6136
E-mail: sales@vanwell.com

Australian Subscriptions and Back Issues:
Technical Book and Magazine Company, Pty, Ltd.,
295 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000.
Telephone: 03 9 663 3951 Fax: 03 9 663 2094
E-mail: info@techbooks.com.au

New Zealand Distribution:
Dal McGuirk's "MILITARY ARCHIVE", P.O. Box 24486,
Royal Oak, Auckland 1030 New Zealand.
Telephone: 021 627 870 Fax: 9-6252817
E-mail: milrchiv@mist.co.nz

Italian Distribution:
Tuttostoria, PO Box 395, 1-43100 Parma.
Telephone: ++390521 29 27 33, Fax: ++390521 29 03 87
E-mail: tuttostoria@libero.it

Dutch Language Edition:
SI Publicaties/Quo Vadis, Postbus 282, 6800 AG Arnhem.
Telephone: 026-4462834
E-mail: si@sipublicaties.nl

CONTENTS

IT HAPPENED HERE
Who Downed Douglas Bader? 2

REMEMBRANCE
Australia's Ex-POW Memorial 26

THE BATTLE OF THE COLMAR POCKET 30

Front Cover: *Bader Bale-Out* by Frank A. A. Wootton reproduced with permission from Wealdown Limited Editions.

Centre Pages: This Sherman, *Renard* of the 1er Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique, 5ème Division Blindée, was destroyed in the battle for Kientzheim on December 18, 1944. Nicely restored, it now stands guard at the western entrance to the village.

Back Cover: *Renard* (see centre pages) stands almost exactly on the spot where an M10 tank-destroyer was knocked out in December 1944. This particular M10 appears to be *Eylau* of the 11ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique, the tank destroyer regiment belonging to the 5ème Division Blindée.

Acknowledgements: The Editor is indebted to Don Caldwell of Lake Jackson, Texas, for supplying pictures from his files for the Bader story. Fighter Command was opposed that day by only one Luftwaffe fighter wing, JG26, and for the German side of the combats Don Caldwell's book *The JG26 War Diary, Volume 1: 1939-1942* (Grub Street, London, 1996) is highly recommended. We would also like to thank Heimdal publishers of Bayeux, France, for providing photographs for the Colmar article from their book *La Bataille d'Alsace, 1944-1945*.

Photo Credits: ECPAD — Mediathèque de la Défense, Paris. IWM — Imperial War Museum. USNA — US National Archives.

When Douglas Bader — the RAF's legendary legless ace — died in September 1982, Britain lost one of its most charismatic and, arguably, its most famous wartime aviator. His reputation for dogmatic courage after he lost his legs in a pre-war flying accident was brought home to the public in the movie *Reach for the Sky* in 1956 with Kenneth More in the starring role (see *After the Battle* No. 35). After having persuaded the RAF to accept him back as a pilot in November 1939, Bader fought the Battle of Britain commanding No. 242 Squadron although the merits of the No. 12 Group's 'Big Wing', comprising several squadrons under his overall command, are still argued about today. After the Battle of Britain had been won, Bader, now promoted to Wing Commander, was posted to Tangmere on the Sussex coast to lead offensive sweeps into France, and it was from the nearby satellite of Westhampnett on August 9, 1941 that he failed to return. For five days it was not known whether he had survived or not until on the 13th came a radio message from the Germans that he was a prisoner in France. The events of Douglas Bader's last flight were written up by his biographer, Paul Brickhill, in the book published in 1954 on which the film was based. The illustration on our cover by aviation artist Frank Wootton depicts the collision which brought him down and, until now, that has always been the accepted version of events. However, this year, aviation historian Andy Saunders set out to piece together for the first time what really happened that day . . . and his investigation, 63 years later, has come up with evidence that draws a totally different conclusion.

WHO DOWNED DOUGLAS BADER?

By Andy Saunders

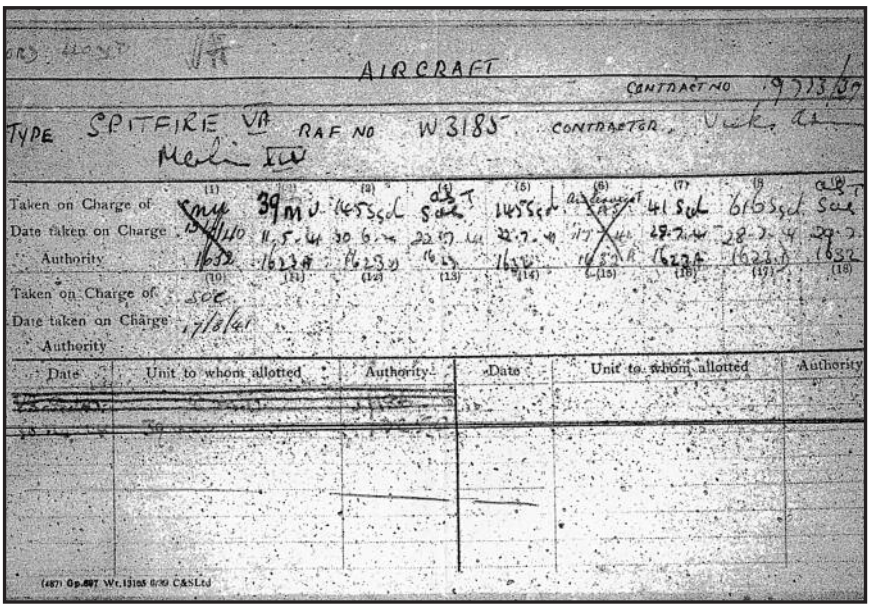
Who killed the Red Baron? The death of the First World War ace Manfred von Richthofen has led to much speculation since he was brought down over the Western Front on April 21, 1918, and there is an almost equal interest in the unanswered question from World War Two: Who downed Douglas Bader?

Until today it is a conundrum that has eluded a positive answer but now we can present, for the very first time, facts that put a different perspective on the capture on August 9, 1941 of one of the most legendary and enigmatic fighter leaders of the Second World War.

Of Group Captain Douglas Bader, the RAF's legless ace, much has been written in countless books and articles and his 1954 biography *Reach For The Sky* by Paul Brickhill was later made into the film of the same name starring Kenneth More (see *After the Battle* No. 35).

Bader lost his legs in a flying accident before the war but persuaded the RAF to allow him to continue flying once war began. From March 18, 1941, he was Wing Commander (Flying) at RAF Tangmere, where he led the Tangmere Wing comprising the Spitfire-equipped squadrons, Nos. 145, 610 and 616. (No. 145 was replaced by No. 41 Squadron in July 1941.)

Already legendary, and feted in the press, Bader went on to make his mark as Wing Leader displaying his characteristic bullishness and overt aggression. Under his leadership, the wing was heavily involved in Fighter Command's new tactic that saw the RAF go very much onto the offensive over Europe: 'Leaning into France' as it became known. On an almost daily basis the wing participated in 'Rhubarb' or 'Circus' missions over France and the detail of the part played by the Tangmere squadrons during this period under Bader is very well covered in *Bader's Tangmere Spitfires*' by Dilip Sarkar (PSL,1996).


AIRCRAFT

CONTRACT NO 973/39

TYPE SPITFIRE VA RAF NO W3185 CONTRACTOR Vick.

Merlin III

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(9)
Taken on Charge of	Sqn	39 MU	145 Sqd	145 Sqd	Air Leaguer	41 Sqd	616 Sqd
Date taken on Charge	11/10	11.5.41	30.6.41	22.7.41	1.7.41	28.7.41	28.7.41
Authority	1632	1623A	1623A	1632	1623A	1623A	1632
	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)

Taken on Charge of SOC

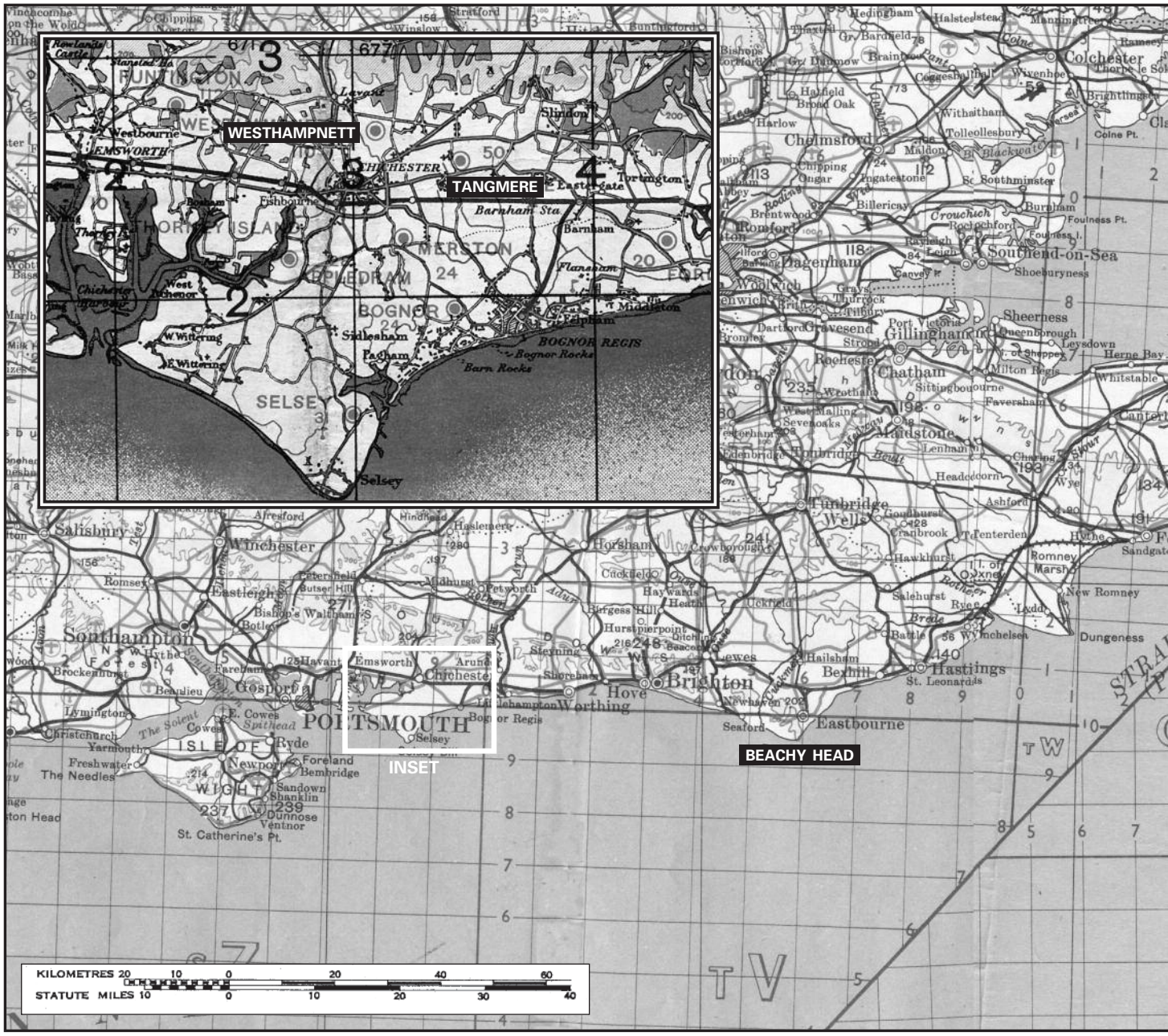
Date taken on Charge 17/8/41

Authority

Date	Unit to whom allotted	Authority	Date	Unit to whom allotted	Authority

(487) Op.697 Wt.13185 6/39 C&SLtd

Top: **Squadron Leader (as he was then) Bader pictured in 1940 on the wing of his Hurricane with No. 242 Squadron. (IWM)** *Above:* **The following year he was flying Spitfires — this is the record card of W3185 *Lord Lloyd I* which he was piloting on August 9. It simply states that the aircraft was 'struck off charge' (SOC) on August 17.**



On Saturday, August 9, 1941, the Tangmere Wing was tasked with 'Circus' No. 68 to cover aircraft bombing Gosnay. In essence, the role of a Target Support Wing was specific and was set out as follows:

'To clear the road to the target area, also to cover the withdrawal of the bombers and escort wings. There are usually two target support wings, one being routed the same direction as the bombers, to arrive over the target three minutes earlier, and the other is given a different route, but also arriving three minutes in advance of the bombers.'

More precise detail of the days operation is contained within the No. 11 Group Operations Record Book that sets out the exact composition of Circus 68:

Bombers. Five Blenheims of No. 2 Group, Bomber Command (No. 226 Squadron). *Fighters*. Escort Wing: Nos. 71, 222 and 111 Squadrons (North Weald). Escort Cover Wing: Nos. 403, 603 and 611 Squadrons (Hornchurch). Target Support Wings: (i) Nos. 485, 602 and 452 Squadrons (Kenley). (ii) Nos. 610, 616 and 41 Squadrons (Kenley).

The same document also records that the cloud was at 6,000 to 7,000ft over France which, as we shall see later, is significant to this account.

Thus the role of the squadrons comprising the Tangmere Wing was very clear and elements of all three departed from Westhampnett and Merston just before 10.45 a.m. Shortly after take-off, however, things started to go wrong for when Nos. 610 and 616 left the Chichester area there was no sign of No. 41 Squadron. Routed via Beachy Head, the squadron had still not caught up with the main formation of 14 Spitfires as it swung out over the English Channel. (In the event, No. 41 Squadron failed to catch up and trailed Nos. 610 and 616 Squadrons into France about 20 miles behind them. Ultimately, No. 41 would return after going 30 miles inside France and only seeing six Me 109s that they left alone before turning for home.)

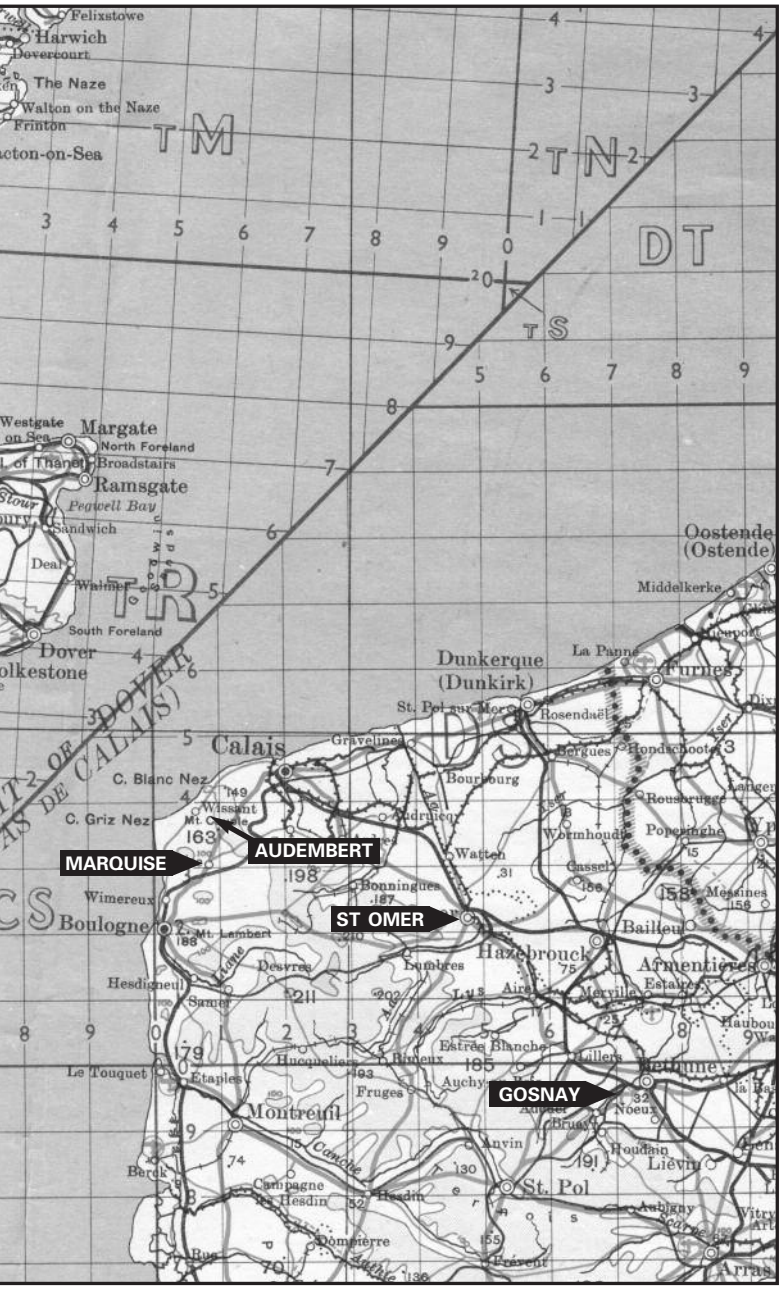
As was his custom, Bader flew with No. 616 Squadron in his personalised Spitfire VA, W3185, bearing his initials 'DB' and a Wing Commander's rank pennant on the fuselage. His radio call sign, inevitably, was 'Dogsbody' although on the outward flight radio silence was observed.

Bader was not very far over the Channel when his air speed indicator failed, meaning that it would be impossible for him as leader to maintain the necessarily accurate speed for the formation to arrive over the target exactly on time. Using hand signals and mouthing the words 'air speed indicator' to Flight Lieutenant Hugh 'Cocky' Dundas, Bader indicated that Dundas should take the lead but he moved back into his lead slot on reaching the French coast near Le Touquet.

The Spitfires of 'Dogsbody' Section comprised Sergeant Jeff West (Dogsbody 2), Hugh Dundas (Dogsbody 3) and Pilot Officer 'Johnnie' Johnson (Dogsbody 4). As they flew into France at 28,000ft Tangmere Control ('Beetle') advised Bader that the bombers and fighters ahead of them were over the target and that there were 20-plus bandits off to the east.

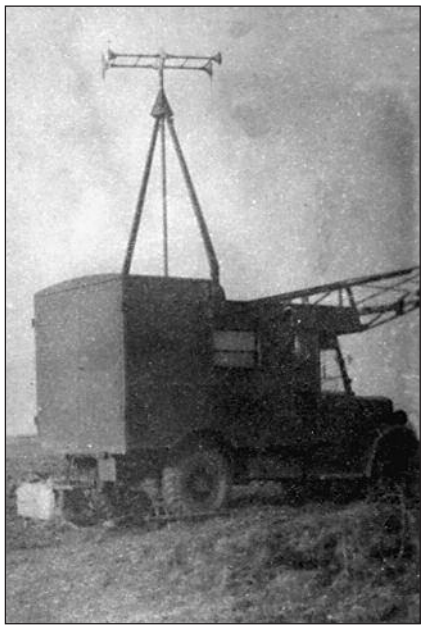
The time was now 11.12 a.m. Moments later Flight Lieutenant Roy Marples of No. 616 spotted Me 109s, announcing: 'There's three coming down astern of us. I'm keeping my eye on them . . . sorry, there's now six.'

Updating the position Marples then radioed that he had 11 Messerschmitts in sight. Bader acknowledged the warnings and was then advised by 'Beetle' of another 40-plus to the north-east of them. A few minutes later, Marples told Bader to keep turning left when he would eventually see the enemy aircraft at his nine o'clock.



RADIO LOG, BEACHY HEAD, AUGUST 9, 1941

From	*To*	*Time*	*Message*
D.B.	Woody	1101	This is the most obvious farce (?) I have ever seen in my life.
Woody	Douglas		Your message understood r/o.
D.B.	Ken		Are you OK?
Ken	D.B.		Yes.
D.B.	Ken and Elmer		Start getting height as quick as you can now will you.
Ken	D.B.		Elmer's not with us.
Elmer	D.B.		.....?.....
D.B.	Elmer	1104	Cannot understand what you say. We're on our way. If you're not with us you'd better decide for yourself whether to come or go back.
Elmer	D.B.		*Unreadable XMN.*
Ken	D.B.	1105	Making smoke.
D.B.	Ken		Levelling out. I'm going down very slightly.
Ken	D.B.		OK.
D.B.		1107	KSL you don't see them very well against this stuff.
Beetle	Walker L.	1108	DB is 20 miles ahead of you.
W.L.	B.		I think I see trails above and on our left.
Ken	?	1110	Yes I have seen 'em. I think we might get up a bit. I think it was very ? that trail we made.
?	Walker 1&2		*Unreadable XMN.*
Woody	D.B.		There are 2+ 5 miles to the E of you.
D.B.	Woody		OK. That transmitter is quite impossible. Please use the other.
Woody	D.B.		OK. Is this better?
D.B.	Woody		Perfect.
Ken	D.B.		Throttle back a bit, I can't keep up.
D.B.	Ken		Sorry my A/S is U/S, throttling back.
D.B.			I will do one ? left now quickly.
Woody	D.B.		There are now 20+, no height 5 miles E of U.
Douglas	Woody	1112	That's getting better OK.
Roy			There's 3 coming down astern of us now. I'm keeping my eye on them.
	Roy		OK.
Roy			Sorry there's now 6. Open out a little.
Roy			I make it 11 now.
	Roy		Cut out the running commentary and just let us know where they are.
	D.B.		Smoking.
D.B.	Ken		?ing left.
Beetle	D.B.		There are 40+ 15 miles to the NE of you.
D.B.	Beetle		Are our friends where they ought to be? I haven't much idea where I am.
B.	D.B.		Yes, you are exactly right and so are your friends.



Tangmere's VHF/DF station was set up in a Commer van parked on Beachy Head — the highest point on the south coast. On August 9 LAC Tom Howells was on duty with the messages being relayed to the Tangmere Ops Room. Bearing in mind that the original log is in longhand, the operator must have really had his work cut out to write down the radio chatter from the three squadrons concerned. 'D. B.' and 'Douglas' are Douglas Bader; 'Woody' is Group Captain A. B. Woodhall, the station commander at Tangmere whose call-sign was 'Beetle'. 'Elmer' is Squadron Leader Elmer Gaunce of No. 41 Squadron which had the call-sign 'Walker'. 'Elfin' was No. 610 and 'Rusty' No. 616, 'Roy' being Flight Lieutenant Roy Marples. 'Ken' is Squadron Leader Ken Holden of No. 610 Squadron; 'Crow' is Flight Lieutenant Dennis Crowley-Milling, and 'Stan' most probably Flight Lieutenant Stan Turner. In some cases, the caller is identified only by the aircraft code-letter like 'YQ-R' denoting No. 616 Squadron with 'L' denoting the leader, e.g. Elfin Leader. Other short forms are 'RURM' — Are you receiving me; XMN — Transmission; 'SA' — Say again, etc.

The Tangmere Wing's adversaries that day were from Jagdgeschwader 26 'Schlageter' led by Oberstleutnant Adolf Galland (left) seen here *(above)* **conferring outside the Maris Stella Hotel in Wissant in August 1941. With him are Major Günther Lützow of JG3, Hauptmann Freiherr Günther von Maltzahn of JG53, Generalmajor Theodor Osterkamp (Luftflotte 2) and Hauptmann Werner Mölders of JG53.** *Below:* **No longer a hotel, the building is now the Maris Stella retirement home.**

From	*To*	*Time*	*Message*
	Walker 3.		Take it easy will you.
		1114	A/C at 9 o'clock a little above over the smoke trail.
Roy	D.B.	1116	Keep turning left and you'll see a/c at 9 o'clock.
D.B.	Ken		Can you see those or is it you yourself?
	D.B.		Look beneath you over the cloud.
D.B.			Will you tell me where to look?
	D.B.		Underneath Billy's section now.
D.B.			O.K. I've got em. *2 XMNs. TOG.* There's plenty of time, get into formation. Straight underneath you.
D.B.	Stan		Are you OK? Are you with us?
Stan	D.B.	1120	Just above you.
	Crow		Keep me in sight. *2 XMNs TOG. Unreadable XMN.*
D.B.	Elfin		A/C on our right.

Galland's wing — the Geschwader-Stab — was based at Audembert — a grass landing ground which the Germans had established for operations against Britain a couple of kilometres inland from Wissant. *Left:* **Here he is pictured taxying out from the dispersal for a mission in November 1940.** *Right:* **The reinforced concrete blast pens still stand in what is now a cow pasture.**

From	*To*	*Time*	*Message*
D.B.	Ken		Look out for right.
D.B.	Crow		Is that you behind me to the left?
			Stay with me that a/c at the front turning left.
D.B.	YQR		Stay with me.
			Several XMNs TOG.
	Elfin		A/C behind us a little to the left.
			Join up. Join up.
Rusty L.			Join up.
Walker 2	Walker L.	1124	A/C 2 o'clock down.
			Big ?? here and some buggers coming down behind us.
			Turn PRT they're coming down behind. PRT that a/c.
			I'll weave about over you.
?	Walker 1		They're 109s all right.
	Crow		One ? STP now.
		1126	Line astern.
Walker 3.	Walker L.	1127	Sg about A.20.
W.L.	W3		OK.
	YQa/c		109s coming down again.
			Form up with YQC you'll form a 4.
			Come on, I'm on your left here.
Rusty B3	Beetle 6	1128	RURM.
			Get onto formation or they'll shoot the fucking lot of you down.
	Crow		? PRT I'll follow you.
Crow			Above or below this cloud?
	YQR		Throttle back.
Beetle	D.B.		Withdraw now.
Crow			2 buggers just above now.
			Unreadable XMN.
			Several XMNs together.
	YQY	1130	Get on to my PRT other side of YQR.

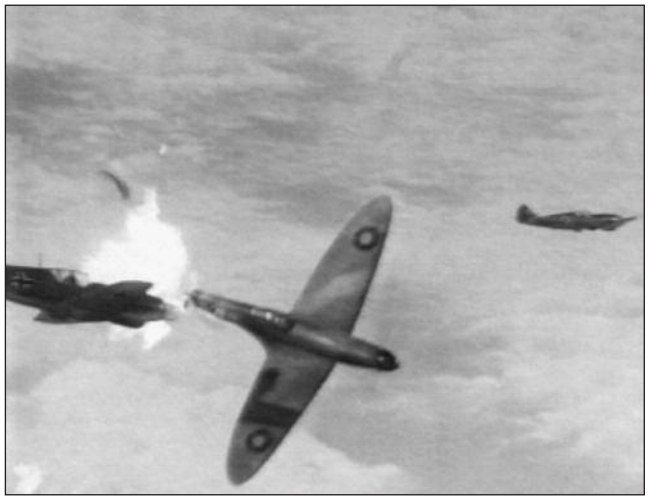
From	*To*	*Time*	*Message*
	Tony		Can you see it?
			Reform.
			Who the fucking hell is . . . tracer bullets (*interference*).
	Tony		Are you going out now?
Tony			Yes, what is that behind me?
			There about 4 just above the murky cloud behind. I think they're Spits. Yes, they're all Spits.
Control	All Beetle a/c	1133	Make your way out now.
			Are you turning left?
			Just going out now.
	Jimmy		Turning left.
Beetle	D.B.		Withdraw as soon as you like.
	Beetle	1135	We all heard it.
			Pretty good too.
			Break right.
	Billy		If you can bring your ?? to STA this time to get back. There's difficulties.
	YQR		Go into this cloud and seek refuge Spitfire. Go under the cloud with me. Everybody with us?
			One short.
			Who?
		1138	Go under.
Jimmy			Watch the sun now Jimmy.
			OK.
			Look out.
			When do you want to break?
Elfin			Keep watching the sun.
		1140	OK Spitfires. OK.
Crow		1141	Keep fairly close I'm going to look round by the coast.
Crow			Coming in behind you.

Audembert then . . . and Audembert now . . . with the same tell-tale high ground in the distance.

Flying Officers Roy Marples (Roy) (left) and Lionel 'Buck' Casson, the B Flight commander with No. 616 Squadron, seen larking about at a dance held at The Dome, Brighton, in May 1941. (Later, Roy Marples as a 24-year-old Wing Commander with a DFC and Bar, was killed in a mid-air collision on April 26, 1944.)

From	*To*	*Time*	*Message*
	Jimmy	1142	*Unreadable XMN.*
			109 coming up on your right.
			Who the hell's talking to whom.
			Join up boys.
	Crow		Are you still about?
Crow			I'm right behind you.
	Crow		Good show.
	YQ		Are you going to B?
	Tony		Are you going out? I've lost you.
			We're low down so we wouldn't see anything in any case.
		1145	Look out on the left.
Roy	Tony	1146½	Throttle back a bit.
Tony	Roy		OK sorry.
			Single Spitfire flying on my left.
			Turn STA and follow me.
Beetle	D.B.	1147½	Do you want any assistance?
B.	Walker L.		Do you want any assistance?
W.L.	B.		Received your message. We are OK.
B.	Elfin L.		Do you want any assistance?
Elfin L.	B.		No, I am OK.
B.	Rusty L.		Do you want any assistance?
B.	D.B.	1149	Are you OK?
	Jimmy		Close up.
			I think Crow's on the left — at least half of it.
	Elfin		All go straight down on your present course. I'll meet you underneath.
B.	Elfin L.		How far are you from B now?
Elfin L.	B.		20 minutes.
B.	E. L.	1151	Thank you. L/O.
Elfin R1	Elfin Y1		Do you want anything?
Elfin Y1	Beetle		RURM.
Elfin L	Beetle		Elfin Y1 is calling you. Will you answer?
B.	Elfin Y1		RURM.
Elfin L.	Elfin Y1		Beetle is calling you also RURM?
B.	Elfin Y1		RURM.
Elfin L.	Elfin Y1		RURM.
Elfin R1	Elfin L	1155	Elfin Y1 is going over for homing from Munga.
Elfin L.	Elfin Y1		Will you XMT for homing?
E. Y1	B.		RURM.
B.	E. Y1		Call Munga on B for Beer.
E Y1	B.		I believe I had you but could not hear.
		1156	Will call again in a few moments.
Ken	Dick		They said call Munga on B.
Elfin B1	B.		RURM.
B.	E. B1		RULC.
E. B1	B.		I can get no answer from Munga. I want a heading.
Beetle	E B1		Steer 340 for the coast.
Tony	E B1		I think I heard that. 340 wasn't it?
E B1	Tony	1159	That's right.
B.	Elfin B1		Do you know your pos yet?
EB1	B.		No I don't know my pos. I'll go over to B and give a fix.
B.	E B1		Thank you.
Elfin B1	B.		Did you get that fix?
B.	E B1		Stand by for a minute.
E B1	B.		S/A.
B.	E B1		Stand by for a minute.
Crow	Tony		Can you see the coast yet?
	Walker	1201	Break left now.
B.	EB1		I am unable to get a fix. Call Munga again now on B for beer.
?	Tony	1203	What's your height? Can you see the coast?
Elfin L.	B.		Strikes me E. B1 and the others are going?
B.	E B1	1204	V.270.
B.	E B1	1206	Steer 270.
B.	E B1	1208	Your XMN for fix not long enough. Make them longer.
?	Elfin L.		You're about to lose your hood if you're not careful.
Elfin L.			I know that.
Beetle	Elfin L.		Have you any idea where E. Blue should be?
Elfin L.	Beetle	1210	I've no idea from their position (*interference*). That's why they're getting out of range.
Elfin L.	B.	1214	Have you got Elfin B yet?
B.	E. L		No, we have not contacted them yet. We are still trying.
E. L	B.		I am just app B.
B.	E. L		OK.
YQG	YQB		Got enough petrol to make B otherwise let down right below us.
YQB	YQG		S/A.
YQG	YQB		There is an aerodrome right below us if you are running short of petrol.
YQB	YQG		Message received.
Beetle	Elfin B	1224	RURM.

More of the players in Saturday's battle including Casson (centre). On the left is Squadron Leader Ken Holden ('Ken' in the transcript) who was leading No. 610 Squadron that day and, on the right, Flying Officer Hugh Dundas whose nickname was 'Cocky'.



These stills show Bader's demise as described in *Reach for the Sky* — the book by Paul Brickhill — and as depicted in the Rank film written and directed by Lewis Gilbert. Gilbert has been responsible for making many great British films such as *Carve Her Name with Pride, Albert RN, The Sea Shall Not Have Them* and *Sink the Bismark!* and Paul Brickhill, a pilot in the Royal Australian Air Force and later a prisoner in Stalag Luft 3, wrote the classics *The Dambusters* and *The Great Escape*.

To compound the already dangerous situation, more 109s were sighted climbing underneath and, although aware of the Messerschmitts above waiting to pounce, Bader dived on the fighters below, taking his section down with him. Dundas suspected they were being led into a trap with the lower formation of enemy fighters acting as bait for the higher element yet Bader had only limited choices. Either he could turn and climb towards the higher Messerschmitts in a manoeuvre that would place the Spitfires at a huge disadvantage; he could maintain his altitude and ignore the aircraft below and wait for the inevitable attack from above; or he could dive to the attack and trust in the pilots following to both warn him and ward off any fighters from above and behind.

Inevitably the Messerschmitts above immediately fell on the diving Spitfires with Pilot Officer 'Nip' Hepple shouting the first warning at 11.24 a.m. As Bader's section tore into the lower 109s with Hepple's frantic call of 'Some buggers coming down behind us!' all hell broke loose. Suddenly, the sky was full of turning and diving fighters as Squadron Leader Ken Holden joined in the fray with his No. 610 Spitfires. Exactly what course of events followed is difficult to unravel after more than 60 years but what is certain is that Bader overshot the 109s and suddenly found himself on his own.

As we shall see later, this point is very significant. What is also certain is that it was a fearsome mêlée, Johnson commenting later that 'It was a mess. I had never been so frightened in my life.' Somewhere and somehow in that twisting dogfight Dogsbody came to grief, his loss sparking almost as much subsequent historic interest and controversy as had the shooting-down of the Red Baron some 23 years earlier.

The accepted version of events has been that Bader collided with a Messerschmitt 109 as depicted in the well-known painting by aviation artist Frank Wootton called *Bader Bale-Out.* In Bader's biography *Reach for The Sky* published in 1954, Paul Brickhill described it like this:

'Something hit him. He felt the impact but the mind was curiously numb and could not assess it. No noise but something was holding his aeroplane by the tail, pulling it out of his hands and slewing it round. It lurched suddenly and then was pointing straight down, the cockpit floating with dust that had come up from the bottom. He pulled back on the stick but it fell inertly into his stomach like a broken neck. The aeroplane was diving in a steep spiral and confusedly he looked behind to see if anything were following. First he was surprised, and then terrifyingly shocked to see that the whole of the Spitfire behind the cockpit was missing: fuselage, tail, fin — all gone. Sheared off, he thought vaguely. The second 109 must have run into him and sliced it off with his propeller.

'He knew it had happened but hoped desperately and foolishly that he was wrong. Only the little radio mast stuck up just behind his head. A corner of his brain saw that the altimeter was unwinding fast from 24,000ft.

'Thoughts crowded in. How stupid to be nice and warm in the closed cockpit and have to start getting out. The floundering mind sought a grip and sharply a gush of panic spouted.

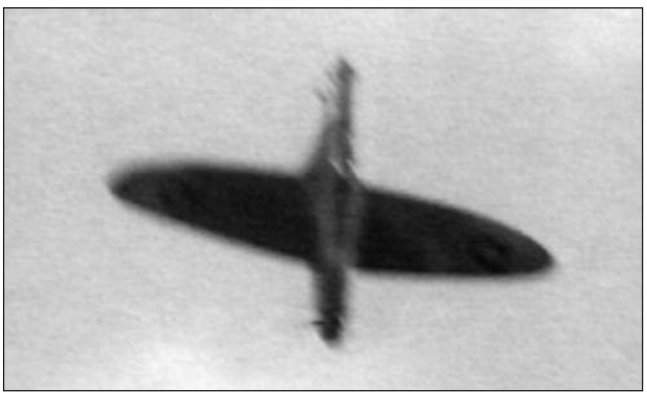
"Christ! Get out! Wait! No oxygen up here! Get out! Get out! Won't be able to soon! Must be doing over 400 already."

'He tore his helmet and mask off and yanked the little rubber ball over his head — the hood ripped away and a screaming noise battered at him. Out came the harness pin and he gripped the cockpit rim to lever himself up, wondering if he could get out without thrust from the helpless legs. He struggled madly to get his head above the windscreen and suddenly felt he was being sucked out as the tearing wind caught him. Top half out. He was out! No, something had him by the leg holding him. (The rigid foot of the right leg hooked fast in some vice in the cockpit.) Then the nightmare took his exposed body and beat him and screamed and roared in his ears as the broken fighter dragging him by the legs plunged down and spun and battered him and the wind clawed at his flesh and the cringing sightless eyeballs. It went on and on into confusion, on and on, timeless, witless and helpless, with a little core of thought deep under the blind head fighting for life in the wilderness. It said he had a hand gripping the D-ring of the parachute and mustn't take it off, must grip it because the wind wouldn't let him get it back again, and he mustn't pull it or the wind would split his parachute because they must be doing 500 miles an hour. On and on . . . till the steel and leather snapped.

'He was floating, in peace. The noise and the buffeting had stopped. Floating upwards? He thought it is so quiet I must have a rest. I would like to go to sleep.

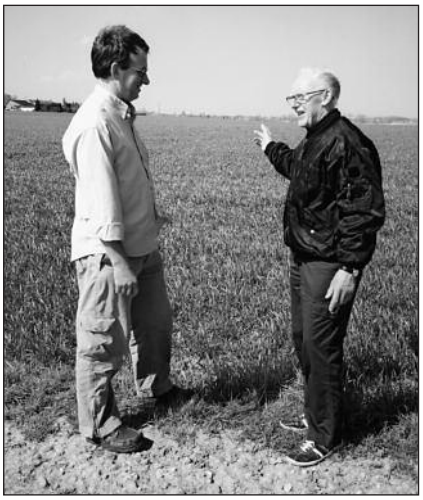
'In a flash the brain cleared and he knew and pulled the D-ring, hearing a crack as the parachute opened. Then he was actually floating. High above the sky was still blue, and right at his feet lay a veil of cloud. He sank into it. That was the cloud at 4,000ft. Cutting it fine!'

This was the same scenario depicted in Lewis Gilbert's film *Reach for the Sky* released in 1956.

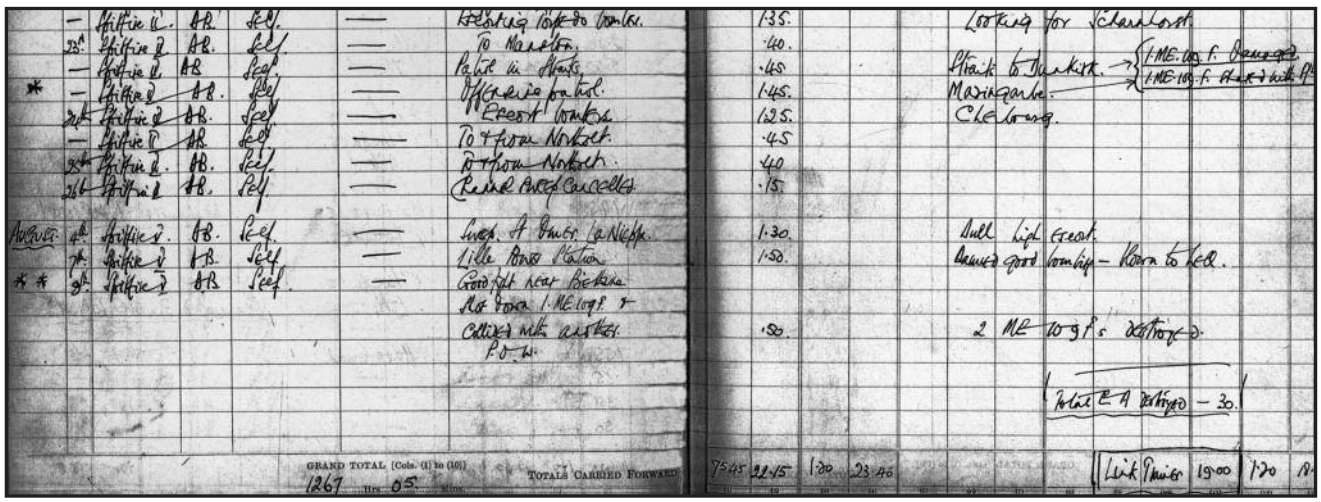


Bader's Spitfire came to earth just south-east of St Omer (see map pages 4-5). Our investigation into the crash site began on March 1, 2004. The leading aviation historian in the aea is Georges Goblet-Monroy, now 74 years old, who has compiled data on all the local crashes around his village of Blaringhem. Four Spitfires came down in the vicinity (see map page 19): Bader's on August 9, 1941; Sergeant Jack Misseldine of No. 611 Squadron on June 8, 1942, who survived; Squadron Leader Phillip Archer killed on June 17, 1943 and buried in the cemetery at St Omer-Longuenesse; and Flight Sergeant Don Bostock of No. 122 Squadron down safely on November 25, 1943. Bader's aircraft, minus its empennage and pilot, came down on Mont Dupil farm at No. 134 Rue Pont du Henaux. *Above:* **Our author, Andy Saunders, first spoke to the farmer, Gerard Duhamel Demaret, who, as a ten year old, saw the aircraft lying virtually intact in the field behind the farmhouse. He said that the Germans put a guard on the wreckage and removed it within a few days.** *Below:* **Then, with M. Goblet, the historian, we examined the spot where the Spitfire had come to earth and ran a metal detector across the field but no pieces of wreckage came to light, confirming what we had been told in that W3185 had been a surface crash.**

Left: **We took the aerial shot two months later — hence the leaves on the line of trees behind the farm. [1] Mont Dupil farm. [2] Crash site of Bader's Spitfire. [3] Spot where his artificial leg landed. It was recovered by Georges Jourdain from the field belonging to M. Mordaq on the opposite side of the Route Nationale 43 and handed over to the Germans. Meanwhile Bader floated down to earth to land on Ferme Florent May at Boeseghem [4].**



M. Goblet shows Andy where the leg landed. It was badly damaged and a Luftwaffe officer from a Flak regiment brought it to Bader in hospital. According to Brickhill, he 'saluted Bader and said: "Her Ving Commander, ve haf found your leg." Like a star making his entrance, a jack-booted soldier marched through the door and jerked magnificently to attention by the bed, holding one arm stiffly out. Hanging from it was the missing right leg, covered in mud, the broken piece of leather belt still hanging from it. Bader, delighted, said "I say, thanks", then saw that the foot still ludicrously clad in sock and shoe stuck up almost parallel to the shin. The soldier took two smart paces forward, clicked to a halt again, and Bader took the leg. He unpeeled the sock and saw, as he feared, that the instep had been stove in. "I say", he said, turning on the charm. "D'you think your chaps at the aerodrome could repair this for me?" The officer pondered. "Perhaps", he said. "Ve vill take it and see".'



The August 9 entry in Bader's log-book, preserved at the RAF Museum at Hendon, was added after he returned from Germany in 1945. His entry reads: 'Sweep St Omer. La Nieppe. Lille Power Station. Good fight near Béthune. Shot down 1 ME 109f & collided with another. POW.' Note also how Bader claims a total bag of 30 enemy aircraft destroyed although the history books now accredit him with either 22½ or 23 kills (see also page 24).

Bader came down just behind Florent May's farm — now called Ferme Saint-Omer — [X] marks the spot.

Inevitably, the interest of aviation historians has long focused upon the identity of the Messerschmitt involved in the collision. Tangmere's adversary that day was Jagdgeschwader 26 with possibly as many as 72 aircraft being involved from the Stabschwarm and all three Gruppen. They were led by another legendary airman, Oberstleutnant Adolf Galland, and his book *The First and the Last* appeared in Germany in 1953. This is what Galland wrote:

'The question of chivalry was demonstrated very clearly by an episode which happened in the summer of 1941 on our side of the Channel. One of the most successful and famous fighter pilots of the RAF, Wing Commander Douglas Bader, was shot down in a dogfight over the Pas de Calais. It was never confirmed who actually shot him down, but when Bader was captured he particularly wanted to know who it was, and if possible to meet his master in the air. He said that for him it was an intolerable idea that possibly he had been shot down by a German NCO. It was not an NCO, but probably one of our able young officers, amongst whom there were some outstanding pilots. I had shot down that day two Spitfires out of Bader's formation [*in fact Spitfires from one of the other wings*]. In order not to offend him, we chose from amongst the successful pilots who had taken part in that flight a fair-haired, good-looking flying officer and introduced him to Bader as his victorious opponent. Bader was pleasantly surprised and shook his hand warmly.'

Here, for the first time, was an indication that Bader may have been shot down although, in contributing the Foreword to the English edition of the book, Bader repeats the collision version of events. He says that 'I collided with one of Galland's chaps' but otherwise makes no comment about Galland's differing description other than to say that 'It is always absorbing to hear the other chap's point of view about an incident in which one was personally concerned.'

So, collision or otherwise, who did bring him down? Examining the Luftwaffe fighter losses for JG26 in this action is simple as there were only two although the total *official* claims by No. 11 Group squadrons that day amounted to 11 Me 109s destroyed, seven probably destroyed and five damaged. Somewhere between Aire-sur-la-Lys and Hazebrouck, Unteroffizier Albert Schlager abandoned his Me 109 F-4 (Werke-Nr. 8350) but was killed when his parachute failed to open. Schlager was more or less in the right place at the right time to have been involved with the Tangmere Wing and, as part of the I. Gruppe of JG26, it seems he was probably in the lower formation. Thus it is conceivable that he could have been involved in a collision with Bader.

Without his right leg, Bader lay helpless on the ground so the farmer Florent May, helped by Arcade Boucher, carried him to the road (the Rue Basse) where they sat him on a chair to await the arrival of the Germans. *Left:* **M. Goblet points out the field where he landed and** *(right)* **stands on the spot where Bader awaited capture.**

Oberstleutnant Galland: 'When Bader was taken to St Omer hospital, in a pretty bad state, his first question was about his artificial limbs. One was standing beside his bed, and at his request a search was made for the other under the wreckage of his Spitfire [*sic*]. It was found, very badly bent, of course, but my mechanics soon straightened it out. Bader was delighted, and the moment the doctors allowed him to get out of bed he started his first attempts at walking. This man had terrific will power. He refused to stay in the single room which had been allocated to him, but wanted to be in the same room as the other British pilots in the hospital. He set the tone, and upheld the spirit and the comradeship.' *Left:* The hospital in Rue des Pipiers still stands although it is currently boarded up. *Right:* A new extension at the rear masks the window from where Bader later escaped by climbing down a rope made of knotted bedsheets . . . but that's another story!

The other loss is recorded as having taken place some 30 kilometres south-east of Guines, and Leutnant Heinz Luckhardt of 8. Staffel in a Messerschmitt 109 F-4 is described in the records as 'wounded in action'. As he survived, he would have undoubtedly reported if he had been involved in a mid-air collision, especially one which involved bringing down one of JG26's notable adversaries.

So, if Bader's demise was not the result of a collision, who could have shot him down? Galland commented on possible claimants in his book, and Leutnant Wolfgang Kosse and Oberfeldwebels Walter Meyer and Erwin Busch all claimed Spitfires in the right area at that time.

In August 1977 the author interviewed retired General Galland at his home in Germany, and amongst the topics discussed was the subject of the downing of Bader. Pointedly, I asked him if he thought Bader had collided with one of his men. His answer was an emphatic no.

'Absolutely not. He was shot down, I am sure of that but the problem was that we didn't know whom by. It was all very odd. You must understand that we in the Luftwaffe had very strict rules for the confirmation of "kills". Exact times and places, witnesses, wreckage on the ground — that sort of thing — all had to match up. All the facts were looked at in detail before a pilot was granted his "kill".

'Now, with Bader of course, all of the pilots wanted to have been the one who shot him down. You can be sure of that. Imagine the fame that the deed would bring the pilot, and what the propaganda people could make of it. The fact is we looked very carefully to see who might have been the pilot concerned but couldn't find one. There were several Spitfires down that day but these "kills" were all tied in to specific pilots. But not the Wing Commander's Spitfire. I know we looked at our Leutnant Kosse as a possible victor but the facts of his "kill" didn't fit either.

'It would have been nice if we could fit a name to Bader's victory and we even looked to see if it might have been the one pilot we lost killed that day. But it wasn't him. I don't remember now why it couldn't have been him but it wasn't. To be truthful, I just cannot understand why we could never find out despite trying very hard. It really is quite strange. Sometimes, a pilot could hit a plane and, in a fast moving battle, not realise he had destroyed it. In this case, though, I think Bader's aeroplane more or less came in two so it seems strange that none of my pilots saw something important like that. If he collided with something, which I personally doubt, it wasn't one of my group's Messerschmitts.

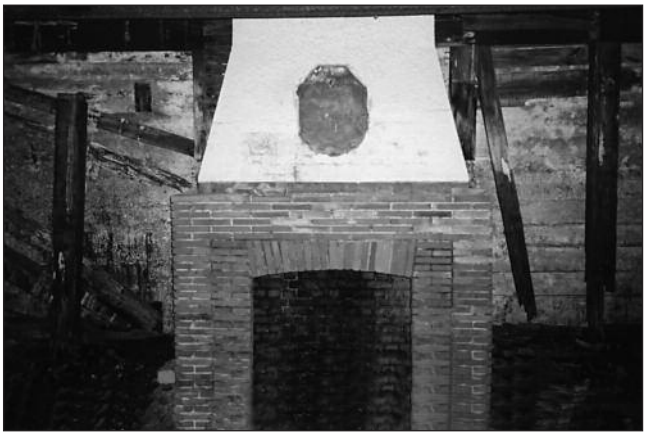
'I suppose he could have met in mid-air one of his own flight of Spitfires. Certainly, he insists it was a collision in the book he wrote [*sic*] but I remember clearly when I met him in 1941 he so badly wanted to know who shot him down. Quite a mystery, really.'

Thus, in spite of efforts to identify the claimant, the Germans were unable to do so and none of their aircraft were reported lost in a collision. Was the only unthinkable alternative solution possible?

Galland: 'One day the commander of the I. Gruppe [Major Johannes Seifert] came, full of enthusiasm, to tell me of the kind of "eagle" we had caught. "You must come and meet him", he said. Bader's ribs were more or less healed, and I sent my large staff car, a Horch which I rarely used myself, to the hospital. An officer, a sergeant-major and the driver fetched Bader in style. Some of our commanders and several other officers had tea with their British guest at the Geschwader-Stab headquarters, and he was obviously surprised and impressed by the lavishness of the reception. Only after some time did he overcome the distrust he could not hide in spite of his charming and winning manners.' Galland's HQ lay in this chateau — La Colombier — a few hundred yards from the aerodrome at Audembert. The owner, Mme Requillart, kindly gave us permission to explore . . . and we were amazed at what we found!

An amazing discovery in the back garden — Galland's personal semi-sunken battle headquarters. The white column on the right is the chimney which has since been demolished. (Buchmann via Don Caldwell)

Galland continues: 'Bader was on his guard against giving the slightest hint of any military information, and in any case we were strictly forbidden to interrogate prisoners: this was left entirely to specialists at the interrogation centres. Nevertheless, I had given instructions than nothing should be said which could even resemble a question. He did not even admit how many enemy planes he had to his credit. "Oh, not many," he said. He did not know how many had been recognised, and confirmations were still outstanding. "Well, you must know approximately how many," I urged him. "No," he replied, avoiding the issue defensively. "Compared with Mölders and your bag, they are so few that it's hardly worth talking about them." Actually he had some 20 to his credit. Perhaps it really was only modesty that he did not want to talk about it with us.' *Below:* **Unfortunately the insignia has been removed from above the fireplace but, nevertheless, a unique piece of Luftwaffe history.**



'Bader loosened up during the course of this free-and-easy conversation, so I proposed a little tour of our installations which he accepted with pleasure and obvious interest. The leg which had been salvaged from the wreckage squeaked and rattled like a small armoured car. Bader asked me if we could not drop a message over England to tell his boys and his wife that he was well and to get him his spare legs, a better uniform than his battle dress, tobacco, and a new pipe to replace the broken one he had stuck together with adhesive tape (see picture *left*). His wife would know what to do. The spare legs were on the left in the wardrobe. I offered him some tobacco and one of my pipes, but he refused. Naturally, it was outside my province to give him a definite promise to fulfil this request, which was certainly of considerable originality, but I promised I would do my best.' *Centre:* Bader climbs aboard the car at the entrance to La Colombier *(right)* to be driven to the aerodrome.

'The masterly way in which our airfield was camouflaged attracted his attention as an expert, and a long conversation about technical details followed, during which he praised the better points of the Messerschmitt while we praised the Spitfire. Would I allow him to sit in the cockpit of my plane? "Why not!" Everything had to be explained to him in the smallest detail. I enjoyed the interest and understanding this great pilot showed. He would have fitted splendidly into our "Club". Bader bent down to me from the cockpit of my plane, in which he was sitting, and said: "Will you do me a great favour?" "With pleasure, if it is in my power," I answered. "At least once in my life I wold like to fly a Messerschmitt. Let me do just one circle over the airfield." He said it with a smile and looked me straight in the eyes. I nearly weakened, but replied: "If I grant your wish, I'm afraid you'll escape and I should be forced to chase after you. Now we have met, we don't want to shoot at each other again, do we?" He laughed and we changed the subject. After a hearty goodbye, he went back to the hospital.'

An historic day at Audembert . . . for Bader in 1941 . . . and for us in 2004! (All Audembert pictures Buchmann via Don Caldwell)

Galland: 'I immediately got in touch with Göring, reported my admiration for the legless Wing Commander, and asked permission to have the spare legs sent. Göring agreed at once, maintaining that Bader's was of the same spirit as they had shared during the First World War. They had extended any possible service they could to their shot-down opponents, even though they had been enemies. We were to make radio contact with the RAF on international SOS wavelengths, offering free conduct to a British plane which could land on an airfield near the coast and unload all the things Bader wanted. Radio contact was made, and our message about Bader's capture and his wishes was confirmed by the British. I was pleased that here in the middle of the war an action was about to be performed which would rise above the national bitterness of the fighting on both sides.' At 1134 hours GMT on August 13, several RAF W/T stations heard a general broadcast in German on 500 Kcs from Station Ushant.

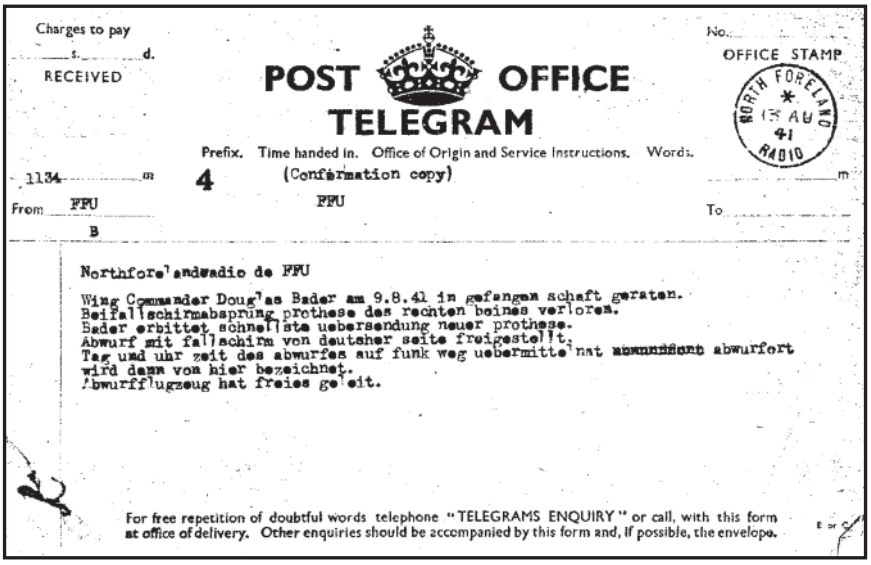
As far as the RAF were concerned, the Tangmere Wing made extravagant claims that day. Its pilots claimed a total of seven Me 109s destroyed and one probable, which does not include the multiple claims made by the Kenley Wing which was also involved in the operation. As was usual in confused air combats, a degree of over-claiming was inevitable, but another of the wing's claims that day was not made until after the war by No. 616 Squadron's Flight Lieutenant Lionel 'Buck' Casson. Like Bader, Casson had been brought down on August 9 over France, spending the next four years in German POW camps. During the early 1970s I corresponded with Casson about his memories of Tangmere and, in particular, the previous occasion when he was shot down near Littlehampton on May 5, 1941 by return fire from a Ju 88. It was not until 1989, though, that I raised with him the circumstances of August 9, 1941. In a telephone conversation during October of that year I asked Casson what happened that day and what did he know about Bader's loss?

He was reluctant to discuss the matter over the telephone but he promised to write to me. He said he would send something that would interest me which would help piece together the sad train of events. Eventually, his letter of February 12, 1990 arrived. In it, Casson told of his unscheduled arrival in France:

'I finally came to rest in a field on one side of which was a copse wherein there was a troop of German soldiers and it just so happened that they were being visited or inspected by an army General in all his regalia. Brought before him I made an effort to show some respect for his rank, but having no knowledge of the language I have no idea what he said to me.

'We were on the outskirts of St Omer and I was marched a short distance to a Luftwaffe office beside the main road where I was searched and my possessions confiscated, later to be returned to me except for one identity disc. After some time a Luftwaffe engineer officer arrived from Gravelines to tell me my "friend" Bader was in hospital there. I could hardly believe it but when questioned would only admit to having heard of him in the service.'

The RAF ignored the request to give a delivery date and time so that the Germans could specify a dropping point. Instead the package was released without warning just west of the aerodrome of St Omer-Longuenesse. Hauptmann Rudolf Ortmann, second right, commanding a maintenance platoon which was attached to I./Kampfgeschwader 1 'Hindenburg', helped retrieve the box.



Charges to pay
s. d.
RECEIVED

POST OFFICE
TELEGRAM

No.
OFFICE STAMP
NORTH FORELAND
13 AUG
41
RADIO

Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words.
1134 m 4 (Confirmation copy) FFU m

From FFU
B

To

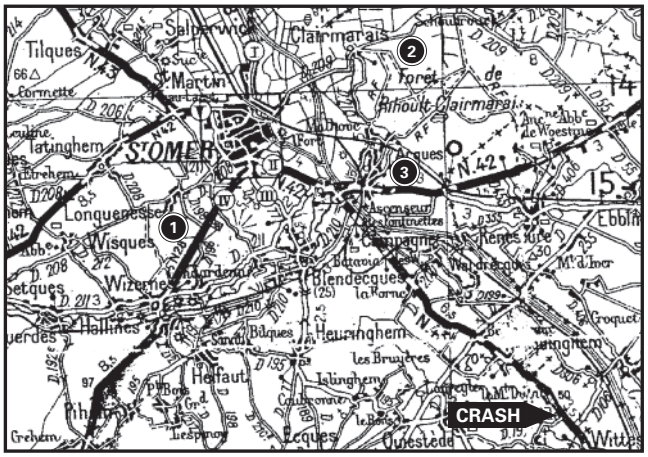
Northforelandradio de FFU

Wing Commander Douglas Bader am 9.8.41 in gefangen schaft geraten.
Beifallschirmabsprung prothese des rechten beines verloren.
Bader erbittet schnellste uebersendung neuer prothese.
Abwurf mit fallschirm von deutscher seite freigestellt.
Tag und uhr zeit des abwurfes auf funk weg uebermittelt abwurfort
wird dann von hier bezeichnet.
Abwurfflugzeug hat freies geleit.

For free repetition of doubtful words telephone "TELEGRAMS ENQUIRY" or call, with this form at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be accompanied by this form and, if possible, the envelope.

This was the first intimation that Bader was safe. The message reads: 'Wing Commander Douglas Bader, taken prisoner on 9/8/41, lost his right leg while baling out. Bader requests that a new leg be sent. German permission granted to drop it by parachute. Communicate day and time of delivery by radio. Place of delivery will then be specified from here. Delivering aircraft granted safe conduct.'

Unfortunatley the chivalry displayed by the Reichsmarschall was not reciprocated by the Royal Air Force. On August 19 a Blenheim crew from No. 18 Squadron (R3843 — 'F' for Freddie, with Sergeants Nickolson, Meadows and Pearson aboard) were ordered to drop a container containing Bader's spare legs, toilet requisites, including a letter from the AOC of No. 11 Group, during a bombing raid on the power station at Gosnay — ironically the same target as that on the day Bader was lost!



Hauptmann Ortmann had arrived at St Omer-Wizernes (the alternative name of the airfield at Longuenesse [1]) in May. His section No. 252/40 of Flieger-Werkstattzug 4 had already been tasked with the recovery of Bader's aircraft and, when the identity of the Spitfire became known, there was a scramble for souvenirs. Ortmann removed the clock from the instrument panel and he subsequently gave it to the RAF Museum at Hendon in north London (see page 25). The nearest JG26 airfield [2] was on the far side of St Omer at Clairmarais *(below)* so the leg was taken there. (Note that the Luftwaffe had also established a third airfield in the area [3] at Arques.) (Dietze via Don Caldwell)

We found the perimeter track at Clairmarais in good condition. The flying control building, although empty and used as a 'club house' by local hunters, still bears the window alteration to convert it into a makeshift control tower. (Dietze via Don Caldwell)

Above: **We were particularly pleased to match this shot and in fact made a special journey to France to take it. (RAF Museum)** *Below:* **The rear of the hunting lodge has not changed at all — even the same paving slabs remain.**

There can be no doubt about who shot Casson down. Hauptmann Gerhard Schöpfel of III. Gruppe of JG26 pursued the homeward-bound Casson in a low-level chase, disabling the Spitfire and forcing the pilot to land in a field east of Marquise. Circling the Spitfire, Schöpfel observed the fuselage markings to substantiate his 'kill' and then watched as Casson climbed out and set fire to his aeroplane just as a squad of German soldiers arrived.

His detailed account of the action mirrors precisely Casson's version of events. Later, Schöpfel visited the Spitfire and photographed the burnt-out wreck. Without doubt, Casson became 'kill' No. 31 for Schöpfel, one of the Luftwaffe 'experten' whom Bader so wanted to have as his personal victor. Indeed, Bader expressed his hope to Galland that his victor was an officer and not an NCO, probably more concerned that his downfall should have been brought about by an ace rather than a novice. However, the real truth of the matter may have been even more uncomfortable for Bader to bear!

Enclosed with Casson's letter to me was a remarkable document: his copy of a letter he had written to Bader on May 28, 1945. As far as I can ascertain, this was the first time that anyone — other than Bader or Casson — had read it. It was a reply to a letter Bader had sent to Casson and, given the date, Bader must have written almost as soon as he had been released from Colditz. Its significance is such that it is reproduced verbatim:

'28th May 1945.

'Dear Douglas,

'Many thanks for your letter and I hope you are as full of vigour as you were when I last saw you at VIB [*Oflag VIB at Dossel Warburg*].

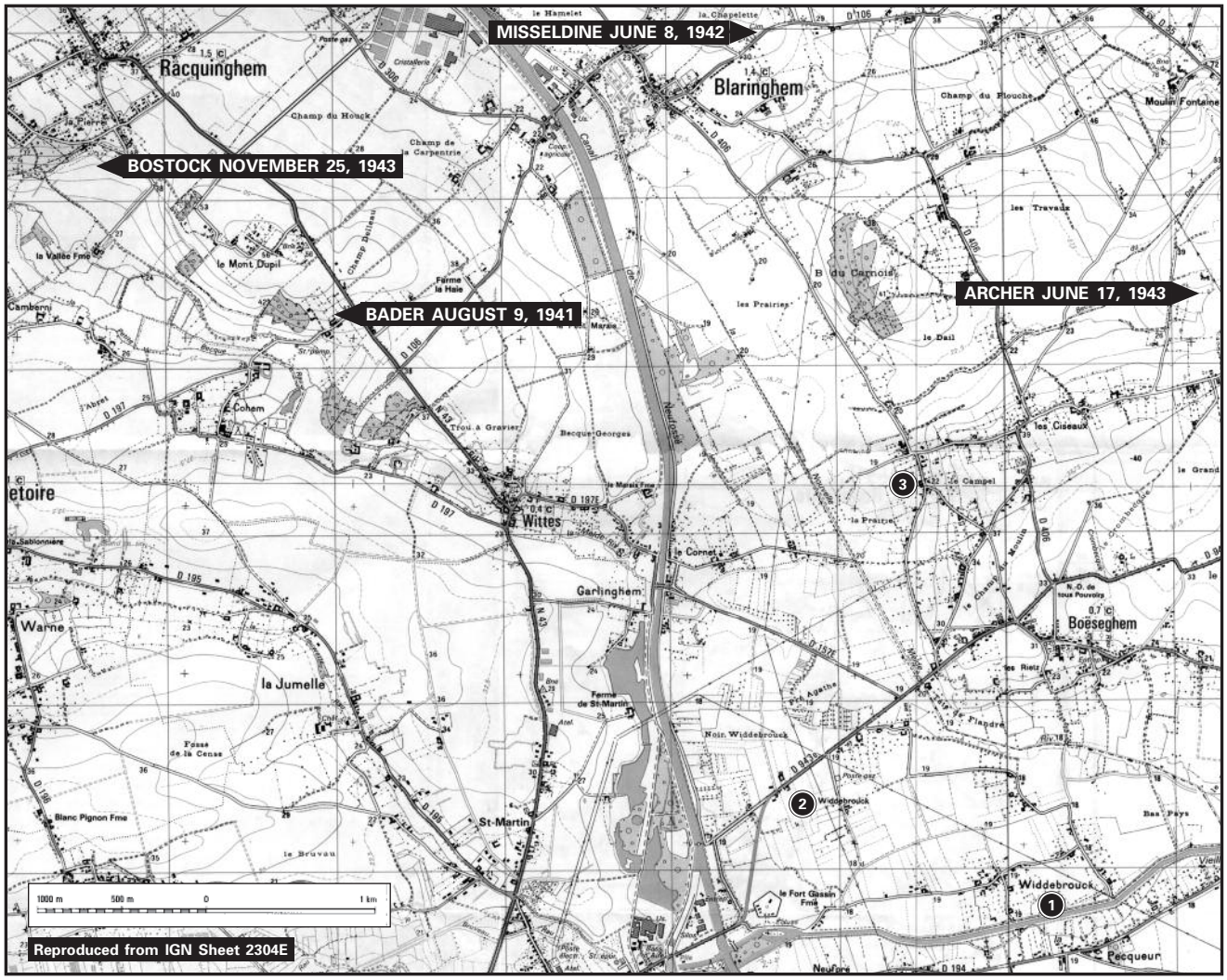
'I read of your safe arrival in England when I was still near Lübeck and wondered how you would enjoy being an aerial passenger after all this time.

'Your letter is full of questions, so I will attempt to answer them in order. Firstly, I am well and very fit but I have no plans as yet.

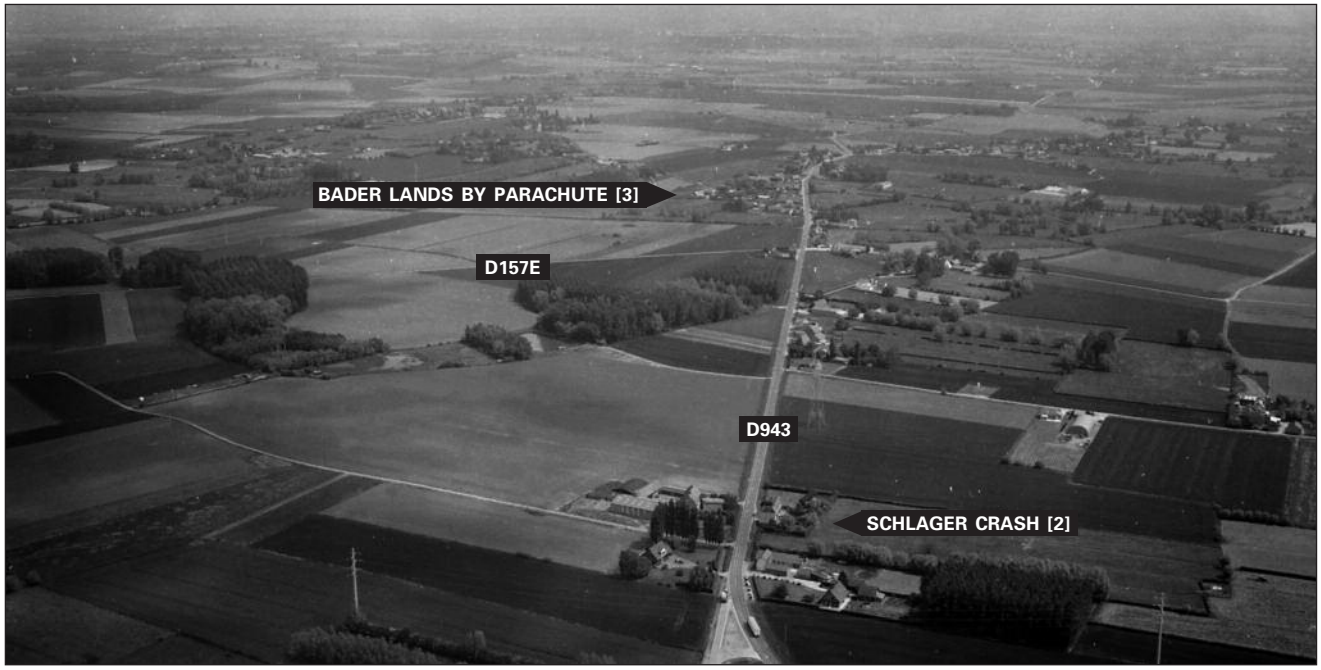
'Now for the day we disgraced the Tangmere Wing and you say you want the whole story? Phew!

'When we dived to attack those Me 109s that were climbing up in formation I was to starboard and behind you with three other

The other RAF casualty in the air battle on August 9 was 'Buck' Casson who had to make a forced landing near Marquise (see map pages 4-5) after being attacked by Hauptmann Gerhard Schöpfel *(left)* **of JG26.** *Right:* **Casson set fire to his machine and Schöpfel later took this picture of the burnt-out wreck. (Schöpfel via Don Caldwell)**



As we have seen, Galland tried very hard to identify the pilot responsible for Bader's demise as it would have been a feather in the cap of any of his men to have been able to add the British ace to their score card. However, confirmation was not forthcoming. Therefore, if Bader was brought down as the result of a collision — as he himself believed — the only possible contender is Unteroffizier Albert Schlager of I. Gruppe of JG26. He abandoned his Bf109 (Werke-Nr 8350) but his parachute failed to open and he struck the ground at Widdebrouck [1]. His aircraft crashed at Ferme Bart [2] about two kilometres from where Bader landed by parachute [3]. Schlager now lies buried in the Soldatenfriedhof at Bourdon, north-west of Amiens (Plot 10, Row 1, Grave 18). (The other German casualty that day, Leutnant Heinz Luckhardt, can be eliminated as he survived and so would have reported it if he had collided with a British aircraft.)



M. Goblet had a record of the crash of a German aircraft on August 8 or 9, 1941 in the field behind No. 150 Route d'Hazebrouck — the road to Aire-sur-la-Lys — so it was a site well worth investigating. *Left:* **Here Paul Cole operates the Forster 'bomb' locator while M. Goblet confers with the farmer, Henri Petit.**

Right: **Pieces of German aircraft were present so Andy decided that the spot must be investigated further to check if this was the machine which had been attacked by Casson. If evidence of the tail unit was present, therefore, it could not be the aircraft he describes as having shot down.**

Left: **June 15, 2004. We arrived on site at 10 a.m. and, having pinpointed the area giving strongest reading with the Forster, work began . . . watched closely by Henri Petit the farmer.**

Right: **The first substantial piece of wreckage comprising a compressed lump of aircraft skin in remarkable condition was recovered at a depth of ten feet.**

aircraft of B Flight. My No. 2 was a Rhodesian Sgt who's name I have forgotten and Roy Marples was on my right with his No. 2.

'I watched you attack those Me 109s that were climbing up in formation. I was well throttled back in the dive as the other three started to fall behind and I wanted to keep the flight together. I attacked from the rear and after having a squirt at two 109s flying together I left them for a single one flying inland alone.

An early triumph was the discovery of this tiny maker's plate stamped with the serial number of the machine — 8350 — confirming that this was indeed the spot where Albert Schlager's Messerschmitt had crashed on August 9, 1941 during the 'Bader' combat. *Right:* **World Fire TV, planning a series of programmes for broadcasting in 2005, were filming the excavation process. Here Andy explains to Sian Price the significance of the plate.**

I finished nearly all my cannon ammo up on this boy who finally baled out at about 6,000ft having lost most of his tail unit. The other three B Flight machines were somewhere in my rear and probably one of the lads saw this.

'Now, I believe we had crossed in at Hardelot some minutes in advance of the other squadrons from Tangmere for we were alone when we sighted and attacked the goons but by the time I had finished my little scrap the other Wing squadrons had joined and were well above me and on their way out to Hardelot again.

'I climbed to about 13,000ft and fell in with Billy Burton and three other aircraft, all I believe from A Flight. We chased around in a circle for some time, gaining height the while and the 109s were directly above us. Eventually we formed up abreast and set off after the Wing.

'Billy had the other three A Flight machines with him flying in pairs abreast and I flew abreast but about 200 yards to starboard. [*Dundas confirmed to the author in 1993 that it was he, together with West and Johnson, who flew back to England with Billy Burton when Bader vanished.*] We were repeatedly attacked by two Me 109s which followed us out and were flying behind and above us. Each time they started to dive I called out and we all turned and reformed, the 109s giving up the attack and climbing again each time.

'About 15 miles inland from the coast I saw another Spit well below us and about half a mile starboard. This machine was alone and travelling very slowly. I assumed

By lunchtime the Furukawa digger had exhausted the 20-foot reach of its arm and had still not reached the main wreckage. So Andy took a decision to hire a second machine with a longer reach — a tracked Hyundai 180 LC3. This arrived at 2.30 p.m. on a low loader . . . but at this point M. Petit showed his true colours. A month earlier he had agreed to a 'disturbance' fee of 150 euros but he had already upped the anti before we arrived to 300. *Left:* **When the second digger arrived, he stood in front of it and held Andy to ransom for a further payment of 500 euros before he would allow it into his field. At the same time he locked the gate, so trapping the group's vehicles. There were angry words and mutterings about the lack of 'Entente Cordiale' — particularly as this was the centenary of the Anglo-French concorde — but Henri Petit would not back down. He had one Messerschmitt to 'sell' and he knew he held all the cards. In the end a whip round produced the cash which disappeared quickly into the farmer's volumous overalls. Digging promptly began with the new machine but with a final Petit ultimatum that the site must be cleared and reinstated by 6 p.m.**

Work continued apace to beat the deadline in a temperature of 96 degrees but, in spite of every effort by the gallant driver M. Clerbout who deepened the hole to 30 feet, a glutinous band of unstable blue clay and the collapsing sides of the excavation, now some 30 feet across, finally defeated all attempts to reach the cockpit. *Left:* **However it is amazing how mixed up the wreckage from a crashed aircraft can be and although the Daimler Benz engine was probably a further six feet down, the engine badge (stamped 68478) was found with hardly a mark on it — much to Andy's excitement.**

Right: **It was only when the hole was being backfilled that the vital piece of evidence came to light — the tail wheel. Sifting through the wreckage later also revealed additional evidence: a piece from the fin with the corner of the swastika insignia; part of the elevator linkage, yellow rudder fabric and a piece of steel airframe bearing a .303 bullet strike, all proving beyond doubt that this could not have been the aircraft which Buck Casson describes as having fired on and which lost its tail. This strengthens the conclusion that he inadvertently shot down Wing Commander Bader!**

As a pre-war Auxiliary, 'Buck' Casson had joined No. 616 Squadron in April 1939 and on the outbreak of war, following initial postings to a Flying Training School and Operational Training Unit, he found himself sent to No. 501 Squadron in France on May 15, 1940. En route, his train was bombed at St Roche Junction and he lost all his kit before eventually making it back to Cherbourg from where he was then evacuated by ship to Southampton. Back with No. 616 Squadron, Casson served with that unit throughout the Battle of Britain and on September 1, 1940 was involved — indirectly — in a friendly-fire episode. Chasing a 'Dornier 215' — in reality, a Messerschmitt 110 — Casson was in turn hit by cannon fire from a Messerschmitt 109. Jinking away from the danger, and away from the Me 110, Casson managed to get his damaged Spitfire back to RAF Kenley although the Me 110's erstwhile protector then came under fire from the rear gunner of the 110 as he pulled up behind in his Me 109! With 7.92mm rounds hitting the Messerschmitt and stopping its engine, Leutnant Josef Burschgens was forced to crash-land his aeroplane near Rye in East Sussex having been brought down by his own side! The Me 110 rear gunner had evidently mistaken Burschgens's 109 for another Spitfire. By an almost supreme irony, Burschgens flew with JG26!

the pilot to be in trouble. I called up Billy and suggested that we cross over to surround him and help him back as he looked such a sitter. I broke off to starboard and made for the solitary Spit and then, upon looking back for Billy and the other three, I was amazed to see them diving away hard to the south-west for a low layer of cloud through which they soon disappeared. I realised then that my message had either been misunderstood or had never been received.

'Like a greenhorn I had been watching Billy's extraordinary disappearance to the left and the lone Spitfire below to my right and had lost sight of the two 109s that had been worrying us. I remember looking for them but upon not discovering their position I assumed they had chased Billy. I was soon proved wrong however when I received three hits somewhere in the fuselage and wing. This occurred just as I was coming alongside the lone Spitfire which I couldn't identify as it wasn't from Tangmere. I broke for some cloud at 5,000ft which I found too thin for cover and was followed by the two 109s.

'I now picked out two more 109s flying above me so decided to drop to zero feet, fly up north and cross the Channel at a narrow point as I was not sure of the damage I had received and the engine was definitely not going normally. I pressed the teat and tried to run for it but the two 109s behind had more speed and were rapidly within range, whilst the other two flew 1500ft above and dived from port to starboard and back putting in quick bursts. Needless to say, I was not flying straight and level all this time.

'In the event, I received a good one from behind which passed between the stick and my right leg and took some of the rudder bar off on its way. It passed into the petrol tank and whether it went on into the engine or not I don't know. Petrol began to leak into the cockpit, oil pressure was dropping low and with the radiator wide open I could smell the glycol heating.

'As the next attack came I pulled straight up from the deck in a loop and on my way down, as I was changing direction towards the sea, my engine became extremely rough and seized up and the white glycol fumes poured forth. There was nothing to do but crash-land the aircraft.

'I tried to send you a hurried message as I had no idea you were also in trouble. I then blew up the wireless and made a belly landing in a field about ten miles south of Calais. The goons, upon seeing the glycol, were decent enough not to shoot me up as I was landing but they circled about for a time and gave my position away to a German cavalry unit in a wood at the corner of the field.

'Setting fire to the aircraft was an easy matter as I was carrying a 'Portfire' and the cockpit was full of petrol but I had no sooner done this than a party of shrieking goons with rifles came chasing over and that was the end of me.

'What eventually happened to the lone Spit I went to help out I have no idea, but as the 109s followed me he must have been OK. I hope so.

'Well, Douglas, that is the story and one I shall never forget I suppose, for I have gone over that bloody day so often in my daydreams.'

As a contemporaneous record of events that day, Casson's letter is highly significant. Note that he says that 'I attacked from the rear and after having a squirt at two 109s flying together I left them for a single one flying inland alone. *I finished up nearly all my cannon ammo on this boy who finally baled out at about 6,000ft having lost most of his tail unit* [my italics]. The other three B Flight machines were in my rear and probably one of the lads saw this.'

As a postscript to the story, aviation writer Dilip Sakar sought out and excavated what he had been told was the crash site of Bader's Spitfire in May 1996. In a blaze of national media attention, Dilip and his team were disappointed — not to say highly embarrassed — to discover that the wreck they had excavated was in fact the Mk IX Spitfire LZ996 of Squadron Leader Phillip Archer, the commanding officer of No. 421 Squadron, who had been shot down and killed on June 17, 1943. (See map page 19.) Later, in the company of a crew from Twenty Twenty Television, he carried out an abortive excavation in the field behind the Mont Dupil farm but, when no wreckage was discovered, the TV company bailed out. (*The Times*)

Bader spent the next three and a half years as a prisoner of war. From St Omer he was taken to Oberursel where the aircrew interrogation centre was located (see *After the Battle* No. 106), then to Oflag VIB at Lübeck before being moved to the air force camp Stalag Luft 3 at Sagan (see *After the Battle* No. 87). He escaped and on his recapture was sent to Colditz which was liberated by the Americans in April 1945 (see *After the Battle* No. 63). *Above:* For a brief period after the war he commanded the Fighter Leader School which had been set up at his old base at Tangmere and it was there that he met his old adversary. Adolf Galland explains: 'I saw him again four years later. In 1945 I was taken to Air Force Interrogation Camp No. 7 at Latimer in North London [it was in Buckinghamshire — see *After the Battle* No. 70] as an American prisoner of war, and from there was driven to Tangmere aerodrome, near Chichester, where RAF group leaders were in conference, amongst them Wing Commander Bader, who had returned to England. This time I stood in front of him as a prisoner and he offered me his box of cigars. Our roles were reversed.' Galland's chivalrous treatment towards his erstwhile foe in 1941 subsequently landed him in hot water and must have soured his feelings. 'Some time later Bader vanished: during the night he had let himself down from a top window of the hospital by sheets knotted together and had escaped. This was very unpleasant for me and the persons responsible, and Command made a most embarrassing enquiry into his escape. Even his visit to our air base, for which I had not asked permission, came up in the course of a stern investigation. The whole affair became even more unpleasant on account of Bader's spare leg. The British did not wait for our detailed suggestions. Soon after our aerodrome and other targets around St Omer had been heavily raided, we received a radio message over the same wavelength: it had not been only bombs they dropped, but also the requested spare legs for Bader. This was not a very friendly reply to our well-meant proposal. To our minds, bombs and charity did not go together. The critics held that this showed what the British thought of such fair play from our side.'

Who was the pilot he so conclusively shot down? The circumstances described fit neither Luckhardt nor Schlager yet they were the only Luftwaffe losses that day. Without doubt Casson scored a victory by virtue of the fact that almost all the tail unit came away from his victim and he saw the pilot bale out, and it need hardly be pointed out that it was a situation exactly like this that befell Bader's Spitfire!

In the initial diving attack, Bader overshot and ploughed through the enemy fighters, finding himself alone. The remainder of his section pulled up above the 109s. Casson, flying behind, then found himself more or less out of the dogfight and through the other side. Ahead of him, he saw a '109' flying alone and inland. But was it a 109? Viewed from dead astern, the outline of a Spitfire and Messerschmitt can be remarkably similar and it is important to remember that at this time the Luftwaffe were using the new 109F which had rounded almost elliptical wingtips and no tail bracing struts. Mistakes could and did happen — see for example the camera gun sequence reproduced on page 18 of *After the Battle* No. 80.

And there is further evidence in Casson's account. The initial attack took place at around 24,000ft, the approximate altitude at which Bader was hit. We know that Bader then struggled to get out of his stricken Spitfire as it fell out of control, and finally managed to do so before entering cloud which we know to have been at around 6,000 to 7,000ft. Thus, Casson's observation of the pilot finally getting out at about 6,000ft fits. What are the odds that two pilots suffered the same fate, in the same battle; for both to be attacked and lose their tail sections, and for both pilots to struggle to get out and finally to do so at 6,000ft? The compelling conclusion is that, in the heat of battle, Casson shot down Bader.

One wonders what Bader must have thought reading Casson's letter. Did he at once recognise the chilling similarities in the combat description? Did he put two and two together but choose to remain silent? Certainly, if Bader did not like the idea of being brought down by an NCO or 'novice' pilot, the notion of being downed by one of his own men would have been even more unpalatable.

In September 1945 Bader was given the starring role — as befitted his now-legendary status with the public — of leading a formation of 12 ex-Battle of Britain pilots in the flypast over London. *Left:* They departed from North Weald where Bader was now commanding a sector comprising 12 squadrons. However, the peacetime RAF was not for him and in February 1946 he left the service with this accolade from Air Marshal Sir James Robb, the Chief of Fighter Command: 'You are leaving behind an example which as the years roll by will become a legend'. *Right:* Bader returned to Tangmere in December 1976 to unveil a memorial in the village, the airfield by then having been defunct for over five years.

As time went on, Galland and Bader became the best of friends, this picture being taken at a conference in Canada in 1980. Bader was finally grounded for good in 1980 on medical grounds. He had undertaken his very last flight the previous June when he piloted a Beechcraft 95 Travel Air at White Waltham for 50 minutes local flying. Since he joined the RAF in 1928 he had amassed a total of 5,744 hours and 25 minutes. Incidentally, when he was brought down in August 1941, Bader, with 22½/23 kills, had the fifth highest score in Fighter Command. Ahead of him at the time were 'Sailor' Malan leading the Biggin Hill Wing with 32; Robert Stanford Tuck with 29; 'Ginger' Lacey with 27 and Eric Lock with 24.

With no obvious German victor identified at the time, and Paul Brickhill's book underway in the early post-war years, the acceptable explanation for the destruction of Bader's aircraft was obviously a collision. Others who knew him well have also commented that, in any event, he hated the idea of having been shot down at all.

Unfortunately we shall never know Bader's reaction to the letter as he died in 1982 . . . although perhaps there *is* an insight if we read between the lines of *Reach for the Sky*. Brickhill says that in Oflag VIB Bader found nobody he knew but from Casson's letter it is patently obvious that this was not the case, and that for a time at least the two men were both in that same camp. Also, throughout the entirety of the book, Bader — through Brickhill — fails to make any reference to Casson yet many of the other pilots of the Tangmere Wing are mentioned by name. Considering the inextricable linking of the fate of the two men on August 9, 1941, is it not reasonable for the reader to wonder why Casson is not mentioned?

On March 6, 1976, the Southampton Branch of the Royal Aeronautical Society held a symposium to mark the 40th anniversary of the first flight of the Spitfire, and amongst those in attendance were Wing Commander Stanford Tuck and Group Captain Bader. The author chatted with both of them over a cup of coffee and produced a photograph of Tuck's Spitfire when he was downed over France in 1942. Bader, suddenly animated, took a keen interest in the photograph. As Tuck autographed it and wrote 'The end of my Spit in France, January 28th 1942', Bader leaned forward.

'Let's have a look at it old boy so that we can all have a bloody good laugh!' he chortled to which Tuck replied: 'I think you have a bit of egg on your face yourself when it comes to Spitfires down in France, Dougie me old chap!'

Looking mildly discomfited, Bader took the photograph giving me the opportunity to ask him about the loss of his own Spitfire over France. The question was clearly not well received, and the unexpected probing about the identity of the Messerschmitt he collided with, or his victor, met with a dismissive wave of the hand and a remark that it was all a long time ago and what was the point of delving into it now. I seemed to have struck a raw nerve and he quickly turned away.

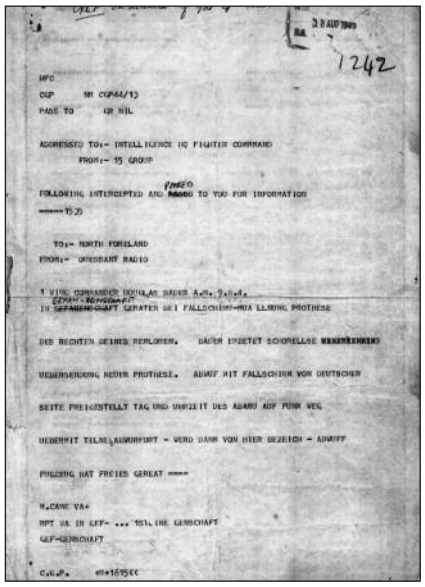
In March 1982 Bader was the subject of a *This is Your Life* TV programme when another opportunity might have presented itself to get at the truth but Eamonn Andrews merely repeated the accepted 'official' version of events, although Bader joked that he was probably shot down by someone on No. 616 Squadron! Was this just a throw-away humorous aside, or was there some deeper significance to that comment? We shall never know. Appearing with him on that programme were a number of the former Tangmere Wing pilots including Dundas, Smith, Morton, Johnson and West, but Casson was not among the invited guests.

Now all the principal players have died; Bader of a heart attack when returning home from a dinner at Guildhall on September 4, 1982 to mark the 90th birthday of Marshal of the Air Force Sir Arthur Harris; Dundas in 1995, Galland in 1996 and Johnson in 2001.

More recently, 'Buck' Casson passed away at his Sheffield home on October 8, 2003, aged 88. Much admired by those who knew him, 'Buck' was especially liked by his ground crews whose loyalty to him was unsurpassed. Not long after his capture, the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross to Casson was promulgated in the *London Gazette*. Had he known or suspected that he had been involved in an incident of friendly fire — and it is possible that later on he did — then he would have been mortified by the consequences of his actions. As a gentleman and a fighter pilot 'Buck' Casson had nothing to be ashamed of . . . it was just a fortune of war.

On March 31, 1982, Douglas Bader was the subject of that week's *This Is Your Life*. Among the surprise personalities introduced by presenter Eamonn Andrews (right) was Squadron Leader Jeff West (second left) who had been flown 13,000 miles from New Zealand to appear on the programme. He was flying as Bader's No. 2 that day as his usual wingman, Alan Smith (centre), was in London purchasing an officer's uniform following his recent commission. Jeff West took up the story: 'We were over the other side and Douglas said "Come on, chaps. There's a gaggle of 109s down here, there's plenty for all. One was just coming up and I was about to press the tit when I saw that he was going to do it on the same one. So I had to pull across and take another one. I shot the damn thing down and spun on top of it. When I recovered from the spin the sky was empty — and I'd lost you.' Douglas Bader's jocular reply was 'I think he'd shot me down' with much laughter from those present but, in the light of what we now know from 'Buck' Casson's fullsome letter written in 1945, did Bader inwardly realise what had happened? That we will never know.

This clock, claimed to have been removed from the instrument panel of Bader's Spitfire W3185 by Hauptmann Rudolf Ortmann, was given by him to the RAF Museum in 1984.



1242

HFC

OUF MR CGM44/13

PASS TO GR NIL

ADDRESSED TO:- INTELLIGENCE HQ FIGHTER COMMAND

FROM:- 15 GROUP

FOLLOWING INTERCEPTED AND TIMED TO YOU FOR INFORMATION

TO:- NORTH FORELAND

FROM:- OBERSAHT RADIO

DES RECHTEN BEINES VERLOREN. BADER ERHIELT SCHNELLSE

UEBERSENDUNG NEUER PROTHESE. ABWURF MIT FALLSCHIRM VON DEUTSCHER

SEITE FREIGESTELLT TAG UND UHRZEIT DES ABWURF AUF FUNK WEG

UEBERMITTELN. AUSWURFORT - VERB DANK VON HIER BEREICH - ABWURF

FUEGUNG HAT FREIES GEREAT ====

H.CAME VIA+

RPT VIA IN CEF- ... LUFTLINE GESCHAFT

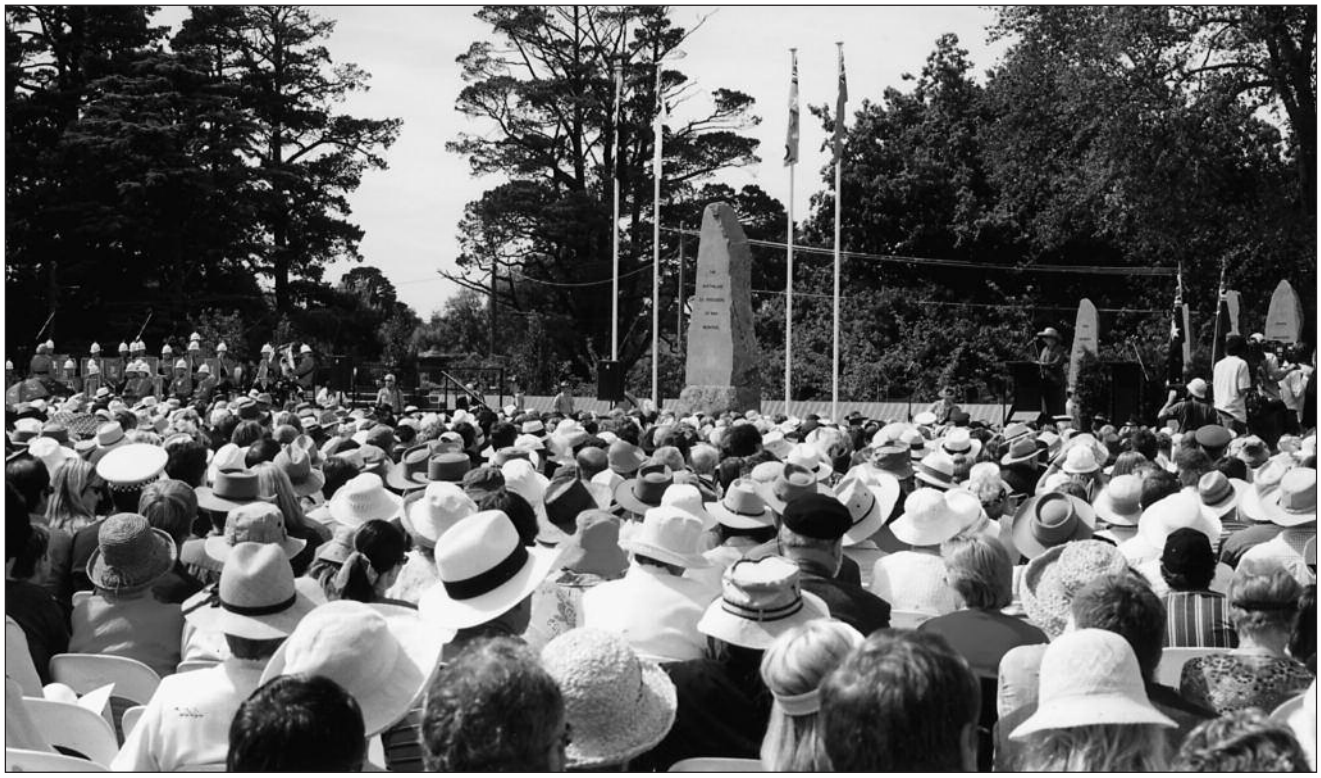
CEF-GESCHAFT

C.O.P. 48+1615CC

In 1995 the family of Sergeant Alan Smith, Bader's absent wingman on the fateful day, paid £5,750 at Sotheby's for a copy of the original German teleprinter message advising of his capture. The one above is a similar copy in the author's collection.

Bader's first wife Thelma died in January 1971, five years before he was knighted. So it was to his second wife Joan — Lady Bader — that the honour fell of unveiling in August 1991 a statue to her late husband at Goodwood racetrack — the wartime airfield of Westhampnett — from where Bader had taken off on his last operational mission, although on that occasion he was not wearing a tunic but battledress — see page 15.

And one last tailpiece. The German airfield on the plateau southwest of St Omer at Longuenesse, where the Red Cross box had been dropped, was one of the Royal Flying Corps' aerodromes in the First World War. It was also used by the RAF during the early months of WWII and was taken over by the Luftwaffe after Dunkirk. The Germans built the hangar which still survives and we flew from here for our aerial photo sortie. Now, because it was the largest and most important British airfield on the Western Front in 1914-18, it has been chosen as the site for the British Air Services Memorial to be dedicated on September 11, 2004.



AUSTRALIA'S EX-POW MEMORIAL

By David M. Green

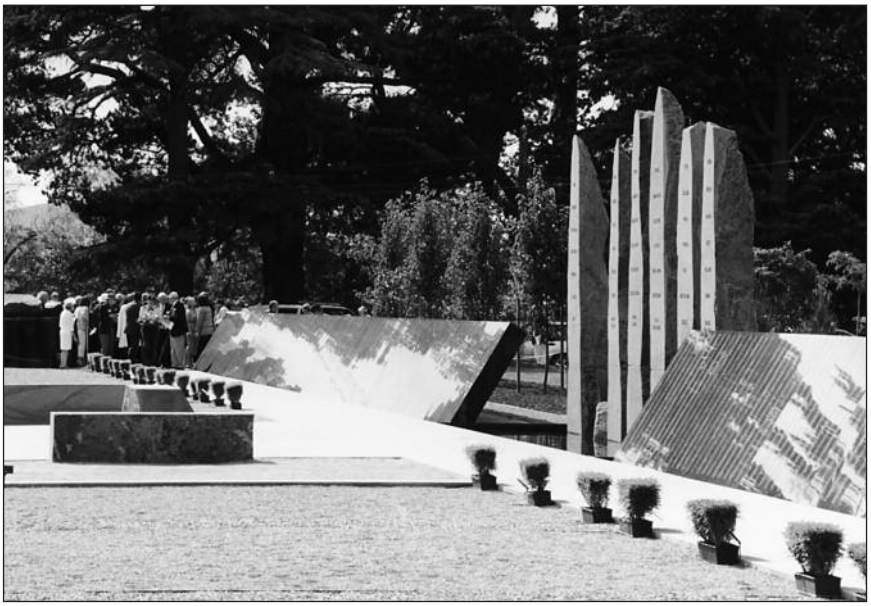
Although numerous memorials have been dedicated to Australia's service personnel who have fought or been killed in wartime, until now no national monument existed to honour those men and women taken prisoner of war — indeed no complete record of their imprisonment existed. Six years after its inception, on February 6, 2004, a striking memorial was dedicated to Australian POWs, many of whom had suffered appallingly under enemy imprisonment.

An international policy defining the correct handling of prisoners of war was first ratified at the Geneva and The Hague Conference and Conventions of 1864, 1899, and 1907. Henceforth, any combatant surrendering would receive a fair treatment as a prisoner. The first war in which troops from the newly federated Australian Commonwealth fought was the Second Boer War (1899-1902). During this conflict approximately 200 Australian troops were captured, four of whom died. Later during the First World War, German forces captured 3,580 Australians on the Western Front, 395 (11 per cent) of whom died. In the 1915 Gallipoli Campaign against the Turks, 232 Australians were captured, approximately 25 per cent of whom died in captivity.

After the First World War — the first conflict in which the treatment of POWs was regulated and monitored by the Red Cross — the 1929 Geneva Convention further decreed that no prisoner should be housed or fed in conditions inferior to those of their captors. They were to be promptly transferred away from the area of fighting and, if wounded, given standard medical care. The use of prisoners (excluding officers) for manual labour was, however, permitted on tasks unrelated to important military projects.

Although Imperial Japan signed the 1929 agreement, the convention was not ratified. This failure, coupled with the zealous belief held by the Japanese that surrender was a disgrace, led to the brutal, inhumane treatment of thousands of Allied prisoners during the Second World War. Under the Japanese, 12,000 Allied soldiers — including 2,646 Australians — died building the infamous Burma-Thai railway alone (see *After the Battle* No. 26). Altogether 22,376 Australians, including 71 nurses, became POWs of the Japanese; the majority captured after the fall of Singapore in February 1942 (see *After the Battle* No. 31). Tragically, 8,031 (37 per cent) died. This figure becomes all the more horrendous when placed into perspective, that is, almost half of the Australian deaths suffered in the Pacific War were among those taken prisoner by the Japanese.

Over the years, this picture of emaciated Australian prisoners of war has been accorded two varying captions. First, that it was taken in Nakom Patou in Thailand in September 1945 with four of the men identified as G. C. Twysel, Lindsay Brooks, Ding Murray and Lionel McCosker. The second version says that it shows members of the Australian 8th Division just released from Changi POW camp with, nearest the camera, T. Chiplin of Cardiff, Wales; F. V. Wart of London, England; Private A. J. Campbell of Hay, New South Wales; Sergeant J. A. Damen of Leidergara, New South Wales; Private G. W. Rogers of Scarborough, England; Sergeant W. J. Brown of Wales and G. C. Twysel of Java, Indonesia.



The first memorial of its kind in the world — unveiled at Ballarat, Victoria, in February 2004.

In comparison Germany treated its Allied POWs in a more humane manner, apart from the execution of 50 officers who escaped from Stalag Luft 3 in March 1944 (see *After the Battle* No. 87). In total, Germany and Italy captured 8,591 Australian soldiers and 1,476 airmen, 242 (two per cent) of whom died from execution, from their wounds, or from disease.

In the late l990s a dedicated group of Australian former POWs proposed the building of a memorial to the more than 35,000 Australians who were taken prisoner during the Boer War, First and Second World Wars, and the Korean War, and to commemorate over 8,000 who had died in captivity. One of the first problems encountered on the memorial project was the discovery that no accurate register existed that accurately recorded the names of Australian military personnel taken prisoner. This was due to several reasons. Often men had volunteered under a false name and occasionally even re-enlisted under another. Sometimes individuals — such as Sir Albert Coates, the senior surgeon on the Burma-Thai railroad — were simply not listed as being a POW. Others returned home from the war and chose not join a service organisation, some simply wished not to have their POW experiences known or discussed.

Having meticulously compiled an accurate roll of names, the organising committee commissioned sculptor Peter Blizzard to devise the memorial. Blizzard's design incorporated the names of all the 35,000 POWs inscribed on a 130-metre long polished black granite wall situated beside six large basalt obelisks bearing the names of countries where Australians have been held prisoner of war. A further obelisk lies on its side in tribute of those who perished in captivity. Nearby, a separate plaque commemorates the 845 Australian POWs and 208 civilians who drowned when the Japanese freighter *Montevideo Maru* was torpedoed off Luzon by a US submarine on July 1, 1942.

At a moving ceremony held at 11 a.m. on February 6, 2004, 6,000 people, including around 500 of the 2,000 surviving ex-POWS, gathered at the memorial site in Ballarat, Victoria, to witness the dedication of the Australian Ex-POW Memorial. The sacrifice and significance of Australia's prisoners of war has now been officially recognised and through this permanent memorial it is hoped that their story will find an appropriate place in Australian history.

Jim Rogers, a POW under the Japanese on the island of Ambon in the former Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia) for nearly four years, points out his name on the 130-metre-long memorial wall inscribed with over 35,000 names. An incredible amount of research was necessary to achieve such a tremendously worthwhile undertaking as so often the privations suffered by POWs is overlooked. Upon the liberation of Ambon in 1945, Jim was one of the 100 or so prisoners on the island, his malnourished body weighing just under seven stone.

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By the end of November 1944, the situation for the German forces in Alsace was quickly deteriorating. In the north, the US XV Corps had broken through the Saverne gap and reached Strasbourg, opening a gap between the 1. Armee and the 19. Armee, while in the south, French forces had reached the Rhine and the last defences in and around Belfort were about to collapse (see *After the Battle* No. 122).

Judging that the Allied armies would probably attempt to encircle and destroy the 19. Armee by means of concurrent drives south from Strasbourg and north from Mulhouse, the commander of Heeresgruppe G, General der Panzertruppen Hermann Balck, and the commander of 19. Armee, General der Infanterie Friedrich Wiese, agreed that their southern flank had to be pulled back to the east and north immediately. General Balck gave this evaluation to the Ob. West, Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt, on the morning of November 24. That afternoon clearer information on the situation in the Saverne area arrived at the Ob. West HQ located in Coblenz as well as news of the failure of a counter-attack by the Panzer-Lehr-Division. As a result, von Rundstedt appealed to the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW – Armed Forces High Command) that without immediate reinforcements — at least two panzer divisions and one infantry division and both fully up to strength — it would be impossible to hold the situation in northern Alsace and close the gap between 1. Armee and 19. Armee. However, all available reserves were currently being husbanded for the scheduled Ardennes counter-offensive and OKW had no spare units available. Without reinforcements, and to avoid destruction, von Rundstedt and Balck concluded that the 19. Armee had no choice but to abandon the whole of Alsace and withdraw quickly across the Rhine.

Following General Eisenhower's decision to halt the US 6th Army Group and use it 'to bail out the northern army groups', General Jacob L. Devers turned his attention to the US Seventh Army attack northward, and on December 2 he instructed the VI Corps to move north and position itself on the army's right wing. As far as the French 1ère Armée was concerned, it was to renew its offensive as soon as possible and finish the job of clearing the Colmar pocket. To this end, some American forces were transferred to Général de Lattre's command. The 3rd Infantry Division replaced the exhausted 36th Division on December 15 and the 28th Infantry Division followed from mid-January. The US XXI Corps was then transferred to the 1ère Armée to take over these two divisions plus the American 75th Division from the beginning of February. This picture was taken at Riedwihr in January when General Devers, in company with Général Henri de Vernejoul, the commander of the French 5ème Division Blindée (left), met with officers of the US 3rd Division. (ECPAD)

THE COLMAR POCKET

By Jean Paul Pallud

As far as Hitler was concerned this was totally out of the question. Not only could he not face the idea of giving up the re-annexed Alsace to the French; he was now being asked to consider cancelling his planned master stroke in the Ardennes in favour of a major counter-attack in Alsace and Lorraine. No, the 19. Armee was to continue the fight and those parts of Alsace still under German control were to be held at all costs.

Nevertheless the situation on the northern and southern flanks of 19. Armee continued to deteriorate and by the afternoon of the 26th von Rundstedt finally persuaded OKW to approve a new defensive line, one that was more or less the same as had been originally proposed by Balck. That night Hitler finally gave his assent and von Rundstedt issued the necessary orders in the early hours of the 27th.

The Hitler-approved directive of November 27 was committing the 19. Armee to the defence of a vast bridgehead west of the Rhine, a bridgehead that soon became known in the Allied camp as the Colmar Pocket. Initially, the salient had a base along the Rhine for 65 kilometres between Erstein and Mulhouse, and its centre extended more than 40 kilometres westward from the river into the Vosges mountains. OKW and Ob. West estimated that with some replacements and at least some anti-tank artillery and assault guns, the 19. Armee could hold the salient for about three weeks, a time span dictated by the date set for the launching of the Ardennes offensive. To this end, during the first days of December, Wiese strove to bolster the depleted combat units of his eight infantry divisions with a variety of military personnel scraped together from all branches and services.

On December 10, Hitler's determination to hold the salient was re-affirmed when he appointed Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler to take command of Heeresgruppe Oberrhein, a new headquarters that had been set up to control the 19. Armee in Alsace and the motley collection of formations assembled over on the eastern bank of the Rhine. Heeresgruppe Oberrhein was treated as a separate theatre command and Himmler reported not to von Rundstedt's Ob. West but directly to OKW and to Hitler himself. However questionable his military abilities, Himmler was able to accelerate the infusion of replacements into both the Colmar area and the east bank defences by having the immediate German interior scoured more thoroughly for supplies, equipment and manpower. In addition, the direct presence of the chief of the police undoubtedly ensured that no unauthorised withdrawals occurred and local commanders were 'inspired' to defend each village or water crossing with determination. On December 15, Himmler replaced Wiese with General der Infanterie Siegfried Rasp as commander of the 19. Armee. One week later, on the 22nd, Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz replaced General Balck to command Heeresgruppe G.

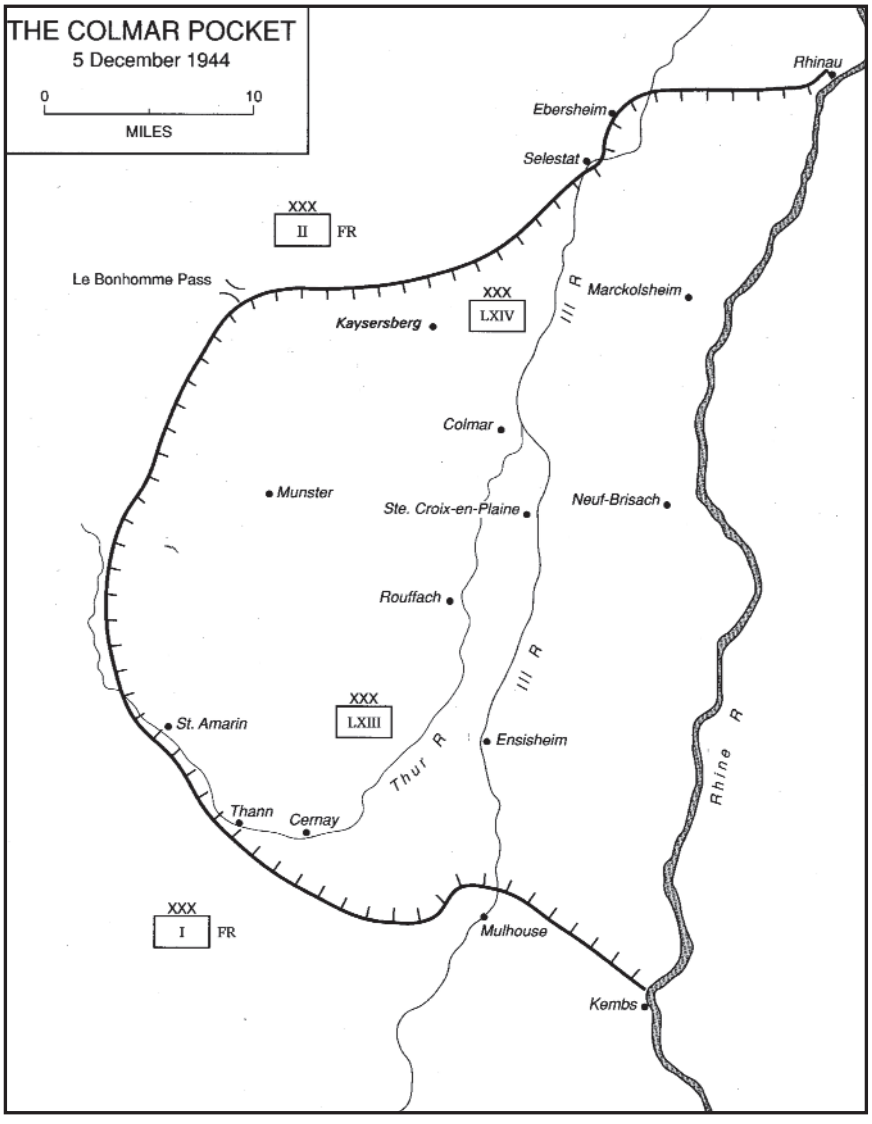
Following the decision by the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, on November 24 to turn the main thrust of the US 6th Army Group northwards on the west bank of the Rhine (see *After the Battle* No. 122) — much to the disappointment of Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers and his staff — by December 5 they had switched the US Seventh Army north as ordered by SHAEF. When Devers and Général Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, the commander of the French 1ère Armée, were surprised by the efforts of the German 19. Armee to continue to hold in the Colmar pocket instead of simply pulling back across the Rhine, Devers wanted the 1ère Armée to renew its offensive against the pocket as soon as possible and finish the job of clearing southern Alsace. To achieve this, he decided to transfer operational control of the US 36th Infantry Division and the French 2ème Division Blindée from the Seventh Army to the 1ère Armée, effective December 5.

To clear the German enclave, de Lattre planned a two-pronged offensive with the French Ier Corps d'Armée attacking north through Cernay on December 13 and the French IIème Corps d'Armée with the 36th Infantry Division and the 2ème Division Blindée attached pushing south from the Sélestat area on the 15th. However, it was questionable whether the 1ère Armée was strong enough to carry out such an endeavour. The November battle had exhausted French manpower and materiel resources, a situation from which they had difficulty in recovering because of their weak logistical

Left: **In the meantime the centre and right wing of the IIème Corps d'Armée were still fighting over some of the highest and most rugged hill masses of the Vosges. This picture of elements of the 3ème Régiment de Spahis Algériens, the reconnaissance unit of the 3ème Division d'Infanterie Algérienne, was taken some time after the capture of the Bonhomme Pass in mid–December. Due west of Colmar, this pass brought one of the major roads across the High Vosges. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **We finally traced the spot where this picture had been taken at the Calvaire Pass at an altitude of 1144 metres, right on top of the summit of the Vosges, some five kilometres south of the Bonhomme Pass.**

and personnel support systems. Efforts to turn FFI elements into regular units continued to have serious drawbacks and the recruiting and training of new personnel, especially officers and technicians, could not be accomplished overnight.

Also the strength of the 1ère Armée was still undermined by the demands of Operation 'Independence', the attempt to open the Gironde estuary which was the approach to Bordeaux, the major port in south-western France. Initially, it was planned to have the French 1ère Division Blindée departing for the Gironde operation on November 11 and the 1ère Division de Marche d'Infanterie (DMI) following on the 27th but, after a series of postponements, the 1ère DMI only started to move out on December 9. The 1ère Division Blindée was due to follow when, two days after the German attack in the Ardennes, SHAEF ordered another postponement. By then the main body of the 1ère DMI had reached western France and, though the division was quickly turned around, it arrived too late to play a part in the renewed offensive against Colmar.



By then the 36th Division and the 2ème Division Blindée — which had been assigned to reinforce the 1ère Armée — had both turned southwards. The 36th Division started to clean out the Kaysersberg valley but after ten days of heavy fighting it was so exhausted that its commander, Major General John E. Dahlquist, requested its immediate relief. With Devers' approval, the Seventh Army replaced it with the US 3rd Infantry Division on December 15.

In the meantime, with the armour of the 2ème Division Blindée having difficulty in moving in the water-soaked plains, its commander, Général Leclerc (Philippe de Hauteclocque), protested that his mission of clearing the area between the Rhine and Ill rivers was more appropriate for an infantry division. When Leclerc went to Paris to plead his case with Général de Gaulle, Devers considered either disbanding the unit or getting SHAEF to move it somewhere off his patch. In the end he finally told Leclerc that the 2ème Division Blindée had no choice but to accomplish the mission.

On December 15, shortly after the arrival of the 3rd Division, de Lattre renewed his offensive against the pocket, using the Ier Corps d'Armée to attack towards Cernay and the IIème Corps d'Armée striking through the Kaysersberg-Sélestat area. The cold, wet and overcast weather slowed down operations and made it impossible for vehicles to move off the roads, which nullified de Lattre's numerical superiority in armour. That first day, neither corps was able to make more than a few dents in the now strengthened German defences.

News of the German offensive in the north spread rapidly through the 6th Army Group during the evening of December 16. At first, many commanders reasoned that the German initiative in the Ardennes would weaken their forces in the south, thereby offering the Seventh Army an unique opportunity to break through the Westwall. However such optimistic thinking did not last long and the strength of the German offensive soon became clear. Late on the 18th, SHAEF ordered the US Third Army to despatch the 80th Infantry and 4th Armored

Left: **On December 16 the 36th Division (with the 30th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Division attached) took Kaysersberg, ten kilometres north-west of Colmar. The Germans counter-attacked on the 17th and house-to-house fighting raged in the village throughout the morning. To try to break the German effort, the IIème Corps d'Armée then sent one battle group of the 5ème Division Blindée to clear Kientzheim, the village east of Kaysersberg, from where the Germans hat set out. Capitaine Davout d'Auerstadt led his squadron into Kientzheim that afternoon where he waited for American infantry to join them to help clear the village. This picture of *Fornoue*, a Sherman M4A4 of the 1er Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique was taken on Place Schwendi in the centre of the village. (USNA)** *Right:* **Peace and quiet has now returned to Kientzheim.**

For several days, the Germans mounted repeated counter-attacks in an attempt to blunt the salient, which threatened Colmar. Consequently the two villages of Mittelwihr and Bennwihr, three kilometres east of Kaysersberg, were taken, lost and retaken several times and it was not until December 25 that Bennwihr was finally secured by the 15th Infantry Regiment. By then the 3rd Division had completely taken over the sector and the 36th Division had been withdrawn. *Above:* **This picture of dead Germans lying at the side of the road was taken two days later by a US Signal Corps photographer, Tech/5 B. J. McCroby. These grenadiers had belonged to the Begleit-Bataillon Reichsführer-SS (note the SS collar patch), one of the motley formations rushed to Alsace to bolster the 1. Armee. (USNA)** *Right:* **It was the details appearing on the road sign that led us to the correct location — at the southern entrance of Beblenheim, just north of Mittelwihr.**

The weak logistical machine of the 1ère Armée proved unable to sustain it in battle for any length of time and the rugged terrain made support even more difficult. One of the best methods of transporting supplies were pack mules like these belonging to the 1ère DMI as the beasts could negotiate the mountainous roads without undue trouble. (ECPAD)

Divisions northward for the Ardennes. At the same time, Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley, the 12th Army Group commander, instructed Lieutenant General George S. Patton, the Third Army commander, to halt all preparations for his own offensive then scheduled for the following day and to prepare to send more of his divisions northward.

The next day, December 19, General Eisenhower held a major command conference at Verdun attended by Devers, Bradley and Patton at which he called for counter-attacks against the northern and southern shoulders of the German penetration in the Ardennes. Third Army was put in charge of the southern counter-strike (which would change its direction of advance from east to north), while Devers' 6th Army Group was to halt all offensive operations and take over responsibility for most of the sector vacated by the Third Army. Priority in supplies, equipment and manpower would go to the forces fighting in the Ardennes.

Consequently, Devers ordered the offensives against the Westwall and the Colmar pocket to end immediately. The Seventh Army was to occupy the extended front, spreading out to the west and north-west, and adopting a defensive posture, and the new boundary between the 12th and 6th Army Groups was to be moved over 40 kilometres west of the old November 26 line. As for the 1ère Armée, although it was to break off the action against Colmar, Devers directed de Lattre to be prepared to resume the offensive no later than January 5 by which time he expected the emergency in the north to be over.

As recounted by the official US Army historians Jeffrey J. Clarke and Robert Ross Smith in *Riviera to the Rhine*, 'privately General Devers was hardly pleased with the new orders. Recalling Eisenhower's decision on November 24 halting the Seventh Army's Rhine crossing in the Rastatt area, he felt that his command was once again being called on to bail out the northern army groups "just as we are about to crack the Siegfried Line by infiltration. . . which would permit us to turn both east and west, threatening Karlsruhe to the east and loosening up the entire Siegfried Line in front of the Third Army to the west".' Although recognising the necessity of turning the Third Army north against the German Ardennes offensive, Devers believed it a 'tragedy' that the Allied high command had 'not seen fit to reinforce success on this flank.'

Thanks to a road-sign reading 'Triembach' that appears in another shot from the same series, Jean Paul was able to determine where this picture was taken. It turned out to be in the hamlet of Hohwarth, on the D203 between Villé and Kogenheim, about ten kilometres north-west of Sélestat.

Left: **On January 7, the LXIV. Armeekorps launched Operation 'Sonnenwende' to re-take a triangular area between the Ill and Rhine rivers near Erstein south of Strasbourg. No genuine photographs appear to have been taken during this operation although Jean Paul has identified this sequence lifted from film footage shot for the German *Wochenchau* newsreel that was shown to cinema audiences in late January 1945. In this still we see grenadiers of the 198. Infanterie-Division on January 7 as they move into Obenheim, one of the villages recaptured during this German counter-attack.** *Right:* **Rue Voegele in Obenheim, eight kilometres south-east of Erstein, looking northwards.**

By the end of December, when the momentum of Heeresgruppe B's attack in the Ardennes had begun to peter out, the German command realised that the Allies had greatly weakened their southern army group to counter the attack in the Ardennes. As a result, the Germans believed that a new offensive in the south could exploit this weakness or, at least, bring some relief to their hard-pressed forces in the north. Accordingly, plans were made and it was finally agreed that the 1. Armee was to launch two attacks on New Year's Eve, one down the Sarre valley and the other through the Vosges. As for Heeresgruppe Oberrhein, it was to launch supporting attacks north and south of Strasbourg.

Heeresgruppe Oberrhein began on January 5 by attacking across the Rhine at Gambsheim north of Strasbourg. Two days later, the 19. Armee initiated another assault south of

With no indication as to the location, and the date questionable, the identification of clips from news film is not easy. However Jean Paul always likes a challenge and comments that 'when I saw this short sequence showing German troops proudly posing with a captured French car I reasoned that it might have been taken in an area just recaptured from French forces. This narrowed down the search as there were not that many and I circled the area south of Strasbourg where a dozen villages had been recaptured during the "Sonnenwende" operation'.

Left: **'I started to work from north to south, visiting each village in turn, and was lucky to find the location in the third village I looked at — Obenheim. The decisive clue was this house on the corner of the street in the shot showing a Bergepanther towing a Jagdpanther of schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654.'** *Right:* **'The Rue de Colmar in Obenheim today, looking eastwards.'**

the city near Rhinau, on the northern edge of the Colmar pocket. The initial objectives of this operation, which was code-named 'Sonnenwende' (Winter Solstice), were limited and consisted of a triangular zone between the Ill and Rhine rivers from Sélestat to Erstein. Then, in a second phase, the advance was to reach Molsheim, another 15 kilometres northward, until eventually Strasbourg was invested.

Charged with the initial assault, the LXIV. Armeekorps commander, General der Infanterie Hellmuth Thumm, had concentrated his attack on the west side of the Rhone-Rhine Canal believing that the French forces between the canal and the Rhine would simply fall back if Erstein could be taken quickly enough. This proved the case when, on January 7, one regiment of the 198. Infanterie-Division drove north with tanks and assault guns of Panzerbrigade 106 in support, and reached Erstein during the first day. It then swung back to the south-west along the Ill river to trap French units engaging the rest of the 198. Infanterie-Division. Most of the surrounded French troops managed to escape across the Ill that night and the Germans then secured the west bank of the Rhine as far as Erstein.

Operation 'Sonnenwende' formally ended there on January 13 for the continuation of the attack northwards was cancelled when the 245. Infanterie-Division that was to launch the second part of the operation was ordered to the Eastern Front. Its scheduled replacement, the 2. Gebirgs-Division, was late in arriving so, consequently, the LXIV. Armeekorps was left with an even larger perimeter to defend with fewer units.

'These film frames are of great interest for a genuine picture of a Bergepanther towing a Jagdpanther — and on the actual battlefield — is very rare. In the shot at the top of the page we can see the special equipment welded on the front armour plate of the Bergepanther and the German cross, and in the other shot *(above)* **the 'Bz III' tactical number on the rear'.**

Following the German attacks in northern Alsace, the 6th Army Group retained the 2ème Division Blindée — arguably its best armoured force — in reserve. On January 15, now confident that Seventh Army could handle the situation in northern Alsace, General Devers decided to commit more forces against the Colmar pocket itself and so ordered the French armour to move south. *Above:* **Light tanks in Rosheim, 25 kilometres south-west of Strasbourg. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **Place de la République today.**

It took much longer than General Devers had anticipated to counter the German Ardennes offensive and it was January 11 before he and de Lattre were able to meet at Vittel to discuss a renewal of operations to clear the Colmar pocket. Both were eager to launch the attack before rainfall and warmer temperatures began to melt the accumulated snowfall which would make the going extremely difficult. For the moment though, Devers felt that the 1ère Armée was too weak to carry the operation alone so he planned to obtain additional units from the SHAEF reserve.

A thick layer of snow had fallen during the night and down the main street this Sherman of the 501ème Régiment de Chars de Combat had not yet been cleared. (ECPAD)

Another nicely restored part of Rosheim with the gate by the Hohenbourg school barring the street — now Rue du Général de Gaulle.

Two days later, General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's Chief-of- Staff, visited the 6th Army Group at which point Devers made his request for two divisions, an infantry division to reinforce the 3rd Division at Colmar and an armoured division to replace the 2ème Division Blindée which he intended to return south. Smith convinced Eisenhower that the request was justified and on the following day, January 14, he signalled Devers that the US 10th Armored and 28th Infantry Divisions were to be allocated to 6th Army Group. He warned him however that the 28th Division was still licking its wounds suffered in the Ardennes and was capable of only limited offensive action.

Meanwhile, the 6th Army Group planners had drawn up an operational plan for a simultaneous attack on both sides of the pocket, aiming towards the major surviving Rhine bridge near Neuf-Brisach. The Ier Corps d'Armée was to lead off in the south with a drive from Mulhouse directly to the bridge area, with a secondary attack in the Vosges north of Thann in order to tie down German forces in that area. After the German reserves had hopefully moved to the south, the US XXI Corps would then launch two infantry divisions and the 2ème Division Blindée in the direction of Neuf-Brisach, assisted perhaps by an airborne assault. Meanwhile, the IIème Corps d'Armée would seize Colmar itself. The planners estimated that the operation dubbed 'Cheerful' would take about one week and, after studying weather and flood records, they recommended that it begin in early February, certainly before the 20th.

SHAEF replied that there were no airborne forces available which did not upset Devers as he saw their employment as an unnecessary complication. However, it was the timing which disturbed him for he was worried about rising temperatures and he insisted that the operation begin earlier, even without the XXI Corps and the 2ème Division Blindée. Instead the IIème Corps d'Armée was to make the main effort against Neuf-Brisach. The concept to employ a secondary attack in the south to draw off German reserves was retained and so the plans were finalised as follows.

On the southern flank of the pocket, the Ier Corps d'Armée was to start the attack on January 20. The corps' main effort was to be on the left between Thann and Cernay, and over the Thur river toward Ensisheim, with the 4ème Division Marocaine de Montagne (DMM) and the 2ème Division d'Infanterie Marocaine (DIM) and some tanks of the 1ère Division Blindée in support. At the same time the 9ème Division d'Infanterie Coloniale (DIC) was to push into the suburbs and woods north of Mulhouse. Once

This series of pictures showing tanks of the 2ème Division Blindée was taken about January 20-25 when the division was assembling in the Molsheim area, west of Strasbourg, after Devers' decision to commit it against the northern flank of the German pocket in Alsace. (ECPAD)

Much of the architectural heritage in the picturesque town of Rosheim is timeless. This gate at the eastern entrance in the fortifications dates from the 14th Century.

Left: **On January 25, the 2ème Division Blindée was ordered to cross the Ill river and clear the Herbsheim-Witternheim area, 30 kilometres south of Strasbourg, in support of the 1ère Division de Marche d'Infanterie that had encountered strong resistance here.**

Here engineers complete the construction of a pontoon bridge across the Ill at Kogenheim, probably on the 26th. (ECPAD)
Right: **A lucky fall of snow enabled Jean Paul to take a 'seasonal' comparison.**

In the south, the Ier Corps d'Armée jumped off as scheduled on January 20 with the 4ème Division Marocaine de Montagne and the 2ème Division d'Infanterie Marocaine undertaking the main effort between Cernay and Mulhouse and the 9ème Division d'Infanterie Coloniale making another thrust north of Mulhouse. The objective was to clear a triangular shape of territory between Cernay, Ensisheim and Mulhouse and seize bridges over the Ill river at Ensisheim. Adverse weather and terrain and stubborn resistance quickly broke the tempo of the advance and it was not before the 30th that the 9ème DIC finally took Wittenheim, five kilometres north of Mulhouse. This shot of men from the 6ème Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale in the centre of Wittenheim was taken on January 31 when the 9ème DIC completed the clearing of the town. (ECPAD)

these forces had cleared this territory between Cernay, Ensisheim and Mulhouse, and had secured bridges over the Ill river at Ensisheim, the main body of the 1ère Division Blindée would pass through and drive for Neuf-Brisach.

To the north, the IIème Corps d'Armée was to attack on the 22nd, two days after the beginning of the operations in the south. The 3rd Infantry Division in the centre, reinforced by one combat command of the 5ème Division Blindée, was to undertake the main effort, pushing south-east from the area between Sélestat and Kaysersberg. On its left, the 1ère Division de Marche d'Infanterie (DMI), with some of the 2ème Division Blindée armour attached, would push east, covering the northern flank of the attack. Once the 3rd Division had secured bridgeheads over the Colmar Canal, about halfway to the Rhine, the rest of the 5ème Division Blindée was then to be committed to seize the objective area.

Numerous streams, rivers and canals lay in the paths of advance of both corps so large amounts of bridging equipment were required. The 1ère Armée had even replaced many of the existing Bailey bridges in their area with timber structures to create extra reserves of bridging materiel, and the 6th Army Group managed to obtain a bridge company from the Third Army to provide support for the 3rd Division.

In Alsace, the 19. Armee controlled two corps headquarters situated inside the Colmar pocket comprising eight infantry divisions and one armoured brigade. The right (northern) wing of the pocket was held by General Thumm's LXIV. Armeekorps, with the 189. and 198. lnfanterie-Divisions and the 16. and 708. Volksgrenadier-Divisions. In the north, Operation 'Sonnenwende' had left the 198. Infanterie-Division holding the Erstein salient and the 708. Volksgrenadier-Division along a north-south line on the Ill river from Sélestat south to Colmar. The 189. Infanterie-Division took over in Colmar itself and the 16. Volksgrenadier-Division outposted the mountainous western section of the pocket. In the south, Generalleutnant Erich Abraham's LXIll. Armeekorps had the 338., 159. and 716. lnfanterie-Divisions. The weak 338. Infanterie-Division was in the mountains north-west of Thann, the 159. Infan-

Ensisheim, the 9ème DIC intermediate objective, was still a disappointing five kilometres away. This M10 pictured in Wittenheim belonged to the 9ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique, the tank destroyer regiment of the 1ère Division Blindée, of which Combat Command 1 had been attached to the 9ème DIC to try to bolster its difficult advance. (ECPAD)

On the left, the 2ème DIM also tried hard to turn the German defences of the Cernay sector and cut them from the rear but, aided by heavy snowfalls and overcast skies that limited Allied air support, the 159. Infanterie-Division held on stubbornly. Four kilometres east of Cernay, the sector of Wittelsheim was hotly contested from January 22 and it was not before February 3 that the town was finally secured. This Sherman M4A2 of the 5ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique was part of the 1ère Division Blindée's Combat Command 2 that was attached to the 2ème DIM. (ECPAD)

terie-Division centred on Cernay and the 716. lnfanterie-Division opposite Mulhouse.

The army reserve comprised just the 269. Infanterie-Division and Panzerbrigade 106, but the former was in the process of deploying to the Eastern Front and its replacement, the 2. Gebirgs-Division, had yet to arrive.

All of these divisions were understrength and undertrained (their units had been fleshed out with hastily trained replacements and recruits). They were also underequipped, having only about 30 to 40 per cent of their anti-tank weapons and little ammunition for their more numerous artillery pieces. Armour was even scarcer, totalling perhaps 65 operational tanks and assault guns with Panzerbrigade 106 (in army reserve), Sturmgeschütz-Brigade 280 and Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654.

On the plus side was the fact that the 19. Armee had good roads to its rear, good wire communications and ample rations and stocks of mines and small-arms ammunition. The weather and terrain also favoured the defence, as did the Alsatian network of small towns, each of which could be turned into a fortress.

Key to the 19. Armee defensive efforts in Alsace was the availability of bridges and ferries over the Rhine. Two bridges remained — at Breisach and Neuenburg; two very strong structures which had proved impossible to destroy by air attacks. In addition the 19. Armee maintained numerous ferry sites along the river capable of handling 8-, 16- and 40-ton loads with even a few of 70-ton capacity. Near Breisach alone were four 10-ton, six 16-ton and one 70-ton ferry sites, two cable ferries and one fuel pipeline.

The picture was taken in the Cité Graffenwald by the side of the D19 two kilometres south of Wittelsheim. When Jean Paul first pinpointed the location in the spring of 2002 the tree which appears off to the right in the 1945 photo was still there but by the time he returned to match up the shot the following winter, it had been felled.

As scheduled, the Ier Corps d'Armée attack jumped off in the south on January 20 but the weather forecast proved wrong and the operation began in the middle of a driving snowstorm. Hitting at the boundary between the 159. and 716. Infanterie-Divisions, the French achieved tactical surprise and drove forward several kilometres on the first day but the Germans reacted quickly. A series of small counter-attacks were launched with armoured support by elements of Panzerbrigade 106 throughout the

Left: **On the evening of February 3, the gap left open between the Ier Corps d'Armée near Ensisheim and the XXI Corps near Sainte-Croix-en-Plaine was down to 15 kilometres. The Germans then speeded up their withdrawal from the Vosges and abandoned Cernay during that night. As the 4ème Division de Montagne Marocaine entered the town the following morning, the stunned inhabitants emerged from their cellars to discover the street littered with tree branches cut off by shrapnel intermingled with the bodies of dead German soldiers. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **Cernay, Rue Poincaré today.**

21st which managed to retain hold of Cernay and contain the French gains above Mulhouse.

When Général Emile Béthouart, the Ier Corps d'Armée commander, shifted his main effort to the right where the 9ème Division d'Infanterie Coloniale had done better, he soon found out that the German resistance was solid right across the front. The French attacks were channelled by roads, forests, streams and small towns through a series of heavily-defended strong points organised in depth. Bypassed defenders successfully pulled back in order, aided by the heavy snowfall and overcast skies that limited Allied air support and vehicle mobility.

At the end of January, after 11 days of fighting, the French were still six kilometres short of Ensisheim, their intermediate objective. By then, Béthouart reported that his infantry was exhausted, his stocks of artillery ammunition almost depleted, and two of his armoured division's three tank battalions reduced to between 16 and 18 operable armoured vehicles apiece. Combat Command 1 (CC1) alone had lost 36 tanks during the offensive to German mines.

The Ier Corps d'Armée attack in the south had at least succeeded in its first goal, that of drawing the German armoured reserves southward, for Heeresgruppe Oberrhein had quickly approved the commitment of those parts of Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654 that were yet in reserve and also ordered Panzerbrigade 106 and the arriving elements of the 2. Gebirgs-Division to the threatened area.

As the 6ème Régiment de Tirailleurs Marocains cleared Cernay and rounded up prisoners, the rest of the 4ème DMM pressed northwards. Brushing aside scattered German forces trying to withdraw from the Vosges, the leading French troops reached Rouffach in the evening. The surprised Germans reacted quickly; consequently the small French force had to withdraw for the night into the southern outskirts of the town. (ECPAD)

Left: **In the north, the IIème Corps d'Armée attacked late on January 22 when the 7th and 30th Infantry Regiments crossed the Fecht river at Guémar and swept southwards during the night. On the following day, as the leading elements of the 30th Infantry took the Maison Rouge bridge across the Ill, on the right the 7th Infantry cleared the village of Ostheim. A French photographer, H. Malin, took this picture some days later when the 254th Infantry Regiment (attached to the US 3rd Division) passed through Ostheim on their way eastwards to the Jebsheim sector. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **Only one of the original houses, the one on the left, remains on the present-day Rue de Strasbourg.**

In the north, the IIème Corps d'Armée attack began on January 22 as planned and initially achieved some success. Major General John E. O'Daniel, the 3rd Division commander, had planned his attack with a successive series of assaults by his four infantry regiments (the 7th, 15th and 30th and the attached 254th). Each was to push east for a few kilometres and then drive south for another 10 to 15 kilometres; the next attacking regiment would pass through the rear lines of the first and then attack east for a few kilometres before turning south as the first had done. In this way O'Daniel hoped to side-step the entire division south-east to the Colmar Canal and beyond, opening a path for a final drive on Neuf-Brisach by the 5ème Division Blindée. The manoeuvre might also deceive the Germans into believing that the Americans were trying to outflank Colmar when their real objective was the Neuf-Brisach bridge and ferry sites.

General Thumm, the LXIV. Armeekorps commander, had noted the Allied build-up between Colmar and Sélestat and had directed the 708. Volksgrenadier-Division to maintain only a thin defensive screen west of the Ill river, keeping enough forces to the rear for strong local counter-attacks. To add some strength, he had attached Sturmgeschütz-Brigade 280 with some tanks and assault guns to the division.

At first, all on the Allied side went according to plan. The 7th Infantry Regiment crossed the Fecht river at Guémar (which was already in Allied hands) late on January 22 and proceeded south. Following them, the 30th Infantry crossed the river during the night of January 22/23 and started to enter the Colmar forest through deep snow. The unit's initial objective was the Maison Rouge bridge, a wooden span over the Ill opposite the south-eastern corner of the forest and Colonel Lionel C. McGarr, the regimental commander, split his force into two attacking forces. The 3rd Battalion was to head south-east directly for the bridge while the 1st Battalion struck out eastwards to cross the Ill about a mile or so above the bridge and move down to the crossing site from the north. The 1st Battalion managed to cross the Ill in rubber boats during the night unopposed and sweep down the east bank of the river, surprising a small detachment of Germans at the bridge. When day dawned on January 23, the 30th Infantry was in possession of the Ill bridge as well as the crossroads to the east and the farm complex of Maison Rouge in between.

The bridgehead was consolidated in the early morning hours of the 24th whereupon patrols were pushed out to the east, south-east and south. With the Germans apparently failing to react, McGarr decided to continue the advance to Riedwihr and Holtzwihr, the intermediate regimental objectives. He directed the 1st Battalion to move through the woods toward Riedwihr; the 3rd Battalion to pass behind the 1st and advance on Holtzwihr, some distance farther south; and the 2nd to follow the 1st into the Riedwihr woods as a reserve.

Just before midday, the leading elements of the 1st Battalion reported hearing enemy armour around Riedwihr and later, from the eastern edge of the woods, they reported seeing a few German armoured vehicles proceeding through the town. McGarr became

Left: **Combat Command 6 of the French 5ème Division Blindée also passed through Ostheim on their way to Jebsheim. (ECPAD)** *Above:* **The Protestant church in the town had been so badly damaged that it had to be rebuilt on a new site on the bank of the Fecht river. This is actually the far end of the Rue de Strasbourg which runs to the left at this junction.**

This picture captioned 'in the Riedwihr area' slots perfectly into our story at this point because it shows one of the treadway bridges established over the Ill river although it does not say that this is the actual Maison Rouge bridge. Taken on February 1, this shot features men of the US 75th Division moving in for the final push to Colmar. (USNA)

increasingly nervous about his lack of armoured support east of the river so he pushed for engineer assistance with reinforcing the bridge at Maison Rouge which had been taken intact but was not strong enough to support tanks. One Sherman of the attached tank company was run up and down the west ramp, causing the structure to shake and sway so violently that it ended any ideas the tankers might have had of charging across. It was decided to strengthen the centre spans and reinforce the surface with treadway bridging but when the sections finally arrived around 3 p.m., there were too few to cover the whole length of the bridge and approach ramps.

Pressed by O'Daniel, who called him again at 3.55 p.m., McGarr was ordered to begin the attack on Riedwihr and Holtzwihr at 4.30 p.m. The 1st Battalion met heavy enemy fire as it approached Riedwihr and was barely able to reach the outskirts of town. The 3rd Battalion moved into Holtzwihr but was counter-attacked by strong tank/infantry teams. Both units requested immediate assistance to deal with the enemy armour.

Under pressure to bring at least some tanks across the bridge at once, the engineers choose to use the available treadway sections

This is the bridge at Maison Rouge as it appears today, looking eastwards. Lieutenant John F. Harmon drove his Sherman up the western ramp — just as these cyclists are doing — but when the tank reached the centre span, the bridge collapsed and the tank fell into the river.

Left: **Pushing south from Maison Rouge, the 15th Infantry took Riedwihr on January 26 but met strong resistance as they tried to advance to the Colmar Canal. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **This is the southern entrance of Riedwihr joining the road from Wickerschwihr.**

Two battalions of the 30th Infantry then moved through the 15th Infantry and resumed the attack south of Riedwhir on January 27 with Combat Command 4 of the 5ème Division Blindée in support. Holtzwihr and Wickerschwihr were captured and the Colmar canal was reached. Later a French photographer, Fernand Charleuf, pictured a Jagdpanther from Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654 abandoned at Wickerschwihr. This was a late-production model with the heavy bolted gun mantlet. (ECPAD)

to overlay the two unsteady ramps in the hope that the shorter centre spans would support the weight. After running three 57mm anti-tank guns and their movers and a large ten-ton truck across the bridge, at 5 p.m. Lieutenant John F. Harmon drove his Sherman up the reinforced ramp and onto the centre span. As soon as the tank had cleared the reinforcing treadway section and driven onto the centre section, the bridge gave way and the tank fell into the river. No more vehicles would cross the Ill river for many hours.

All three battalions east of the river then suddenly found themselves in the midst of a general counter-attack by elements of the 708. Volksgrenadier-Division and Sturmgeschütz-Brigade 280. Around 6 p.m. one American tank officer who had crossed the Maison Rouge bridge on foot to reconnoitre the opposite side, reported streams of soldiers pouring back from the Riedwihr woods in complete disorder, abandoning weapons and attempting to climb over the damaged bridge. In the words of the official US Army historians Clarke and Smith: 'In the background he noted white tracers from German automatic weapons mingled with the red tracers of American arms — someone was still fighting — but most of the regiment appeared to be taking refuge along the stream and riverbanks or braving the cold waters of the Ill to reach the opposite shore. There, frustrated tank and tank destroyer crews watched the debacle and shortly thereafter, as the sunlight began to fade, they spotted the squat German assault guns moving up two by two, each section covering the advance of the other. Anti-tank and artillery fire kept the counter-attacking force at bay for a while, but sometime after dark the bridgehead appeared to be in German hands, though no one could tell for sure.'

At 8.30 p.m. O'Daniel ordered Lieutenant Colonel Hallett D. Edson, the commander of

The two houses visible in the background of Fernand's photo gave Jean Paul the clue for pinpointing the particular field between Wickerschwihr and Holtzwihr where the Jagdpanther met its end.

In the meantime, a few kilometres to the north-east, the 254th Infantry and Combat Command 6 attacked Jebsheim where violent fighting continued throughout the 27th and the 28th. By the evening the village was at last firmly in Allied hands. (ECPAD)

the 15th Infantry, to secure the bridgehead, see to the repair of the structure, and resume the 3rd Division's attack as soon as possible. Edson alerted his 3rd Battalion and immediately sent two of its rifle companies, I and K, to cross the Ill some distance above the bridge. Descending on Maison Rouge from the north as the 30th Infantry's 1st Battalion had done 24 hours earlier, at 5 a.m. on the 24th the two companies scattered the small German holding force at the bridge and rescued a number of 30th Regiment infantrymen who had somehow survived the night on the east bank.

Clarke and Smith: 'Instructed to defend both the bridge area and the cross-roads, the battalion commander gave Company K the responsibility for the crossing site and sent Company I out to occupy the cross-roads. As dawn came, the Company I commander, finding the cross-roads completely exposed and without any cover, requested permission to pull the unit back to the tree line, but was instructed to hold in place: division engineers were just completing a new treadway bridge to the north and armoured support could be expected shortly. For the next several hours the men of Company I frantically chipped away at the frozen ground, digging up at best a few inches of dirt, ice and snow and wondering when the tanks would arrive. They finally came about three hours later, but from the wrong side.

Left: **This 75mm anti-tank gun abandoned by the side of the road leading from Jebsheim to the canal south of the village was one of those which, together with the deadly 88mm guns of some**

Nashorn tank destroyers of Panzerjäger-Abteilung 525, destroyed three Sherman tanks and three M10 tank destroyers of the French command during the fighting for the village. (ECPAD)

The Germans fought hard to retain Jebsheim and their losses were heavy and at least 800 prisoners were reported to have been taken by the Franco-American force. When Monsieur Malin (see page 41, top) took these pictures on January 29 the Germans were already preparing their counter-attack. (ECPAD)

'At 8 a.m. on the 24th, the Germans launched their second counter-attack against the bridgehead with 13 heavy assault guns and a company or more of infantry. As the enemy machines began pushing through the mile or so of fields between Company I and the Riedwihr woods, the American soldiers scrambled into their makeshift foxholes and watched and waited, lying flat on the frozen ground. Friendly artillery soon caused the attacking infantry, barely visible at first, to disperse and lag behind; but the assault guns, accompanied by a few tanks and lighter armoured vehicles, continued toward them at a steady pace. The company commander and his forward observer ticked off the German progress for many to hear — 800 yards away, then 600 and then 500. A few panicked and fled and others asked their officers; "Can we go?" The rest stayed, although, as one sergeant later recalled "we all practically had one foot out of the foxhole" and when the company commander finally made the decision to pull back "we didn't have to give the order very loud".

'That morning, shortly after 8 a.m., the company was overrun. Some soldiers were crushed under the German tank treads or machine-gunned where they lay; others managed to fall back into the Company K area closer to the river; still others were shot while trying to surrender.'

Left: **Elements of Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 136 with some Jagdpanthers of Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654 in support mounted the attack on Jebsheim on the morning of the 29th and again in that afternoon. That same day, Malin took this shot of American infantry resuming the advance from Jebsheim eastwards in the direction of Artzenheim. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **No snow and a much nicer weather when Jean Paul took this comparison in February 2003.**

Although this is another Jagdpanther disabled near Jebsheim — one of the five lost in the sector during the last days of January — it is important to stress that the Germans did not possess strong armoured forces in Alsace. By mid-January, with the 30 Jagdpanthers of Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654 and the armour available to Sturmgeschütz-Brigade 280 and Panzerbrigade 106, there were no more than 55 panzers of various types available. (ECPAD)

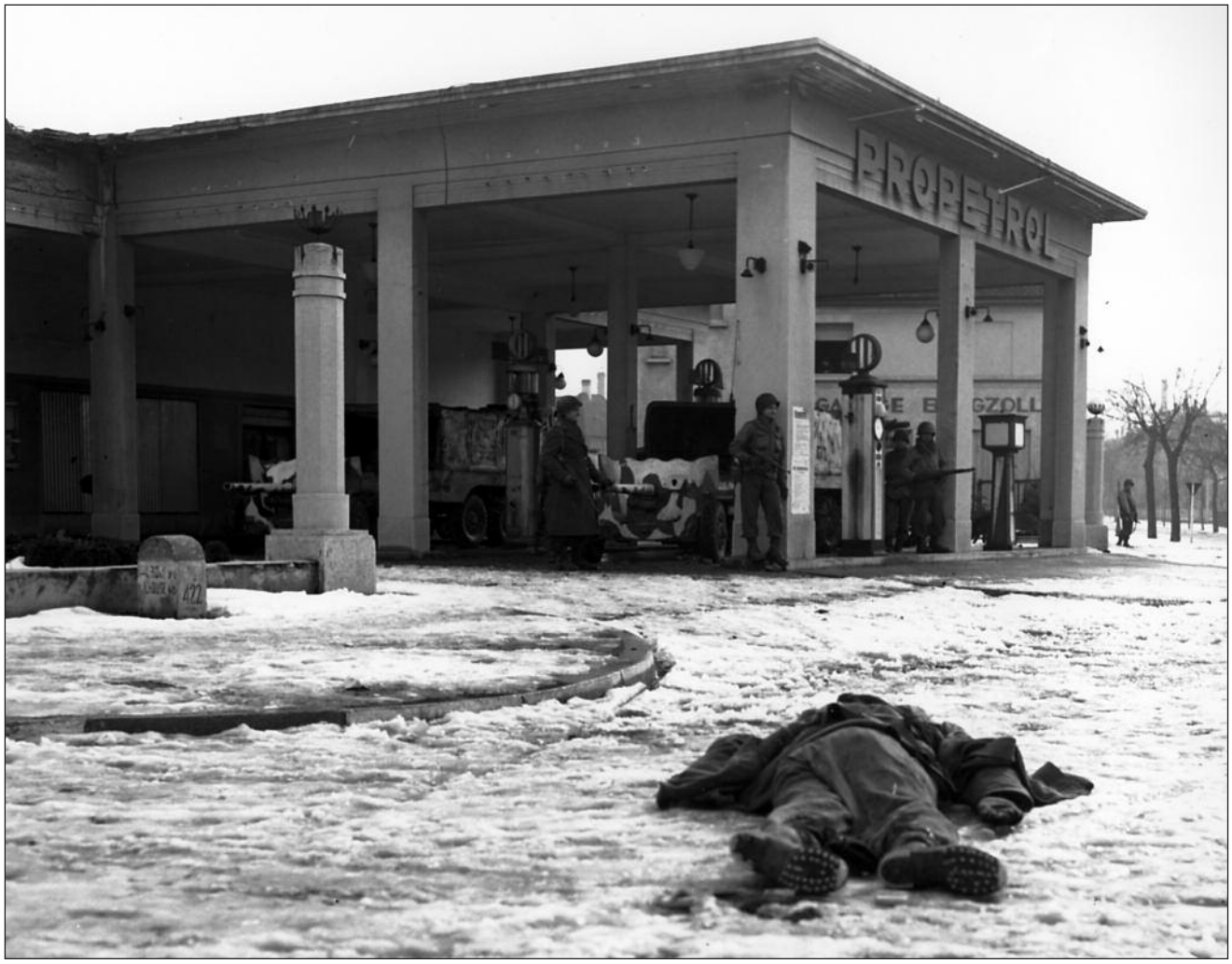
It was January 31 when Malin took this last shot. The snow had melted over the previous two days, turning the street into a sea of mud. (ECPAD)

A café has since replaced the station inn — named the Gasthaus zum Bahnhof in what is essentially a German-speaking region of France — which once occupied this corner of Jebsheim.

Left: **At 7 a.m. on February 3 the US XXI Corps launched the final push into Colmar. The 109th Infantry led the advance, followed by a battle group of the 5ème Division Blindée. Here an M5 light tank of the 1er Régiment de Cuirassiers rounds the corner as crowds line the street to cheer their liberators. (USNA)** *Right:* **This is Rue Kléber; Place Rapp lies just behind the photographer.**

At 11.30 a.m. the leading tanks reached Place Rapp which lies in the centre of Colmar. Exhilarated tankers of the 5ème Division Blindée rejoice in the historic moment: Colmar, second only in importance to Strasbourg in the province annexed by Germany, was back in French hands. The campaign in Alsace was about to reach its finale. (ECPAD)

Left: **An M10 of the 11ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique, the tank destroyer regiment of the 5ème Division Blindée, stands guard in front of former German barracks. (USNA)** *Above:* **This is the main entrance to Quartier Bruat on Route de Strasbourg. The sports ground indicated by the German sign is still there bearing its original name: Stade des Francs.**



A dead German soldier lies prostrate in the snow in front of a garage where the Americans have emplaced two anti-tank guns. (USNA)

The battle for the bridgehead continued throughout the morning and into the early afternoon, neither side being able to secure the area. While direct fire from American tanks and tank destroyers from across the Ill river had forced the German assault guns back, the German infantrymen were unable to overcome the American defenders. Two American tanks and a tank destroyer finally crossed the new treadway bridge established some distance to the north and charged south only to be promptly disabled by German assault guns. Finally, about 2.30 p.m., the 1st Battalion of the 15th Infantry counter-attacked from the north with more armour in support and managed to relieve the men trapped at the bridge.

The 15th Infantry continued its advance southwards and entered Riedwihr on the night of January 25/26. For two days, the Germans launched repeated counter-attacks with no success. It was during one of these attempts on the 26th that 2nd Lieutenant Audie Murphy earned the Medal of Honor for turning back several attacks from the turret of a burning tank destroyer (see *After the Battle* No. 3). The Colmar Canal was crossed on the night of January 29/30 and the following day the 3rd Division's three regiments drove several kilometres south of the canal to secure the crossing sites. The advance then halted. The 3rd Division was exhausted, with some of its rifle companies down to 30 men.

General Devers then decided to commit the XXI Corps to control three American divisions, the 3rd, the 28th and the 75th Infantry Divisions, for a drive on Neuf-Brisach, with the US 12th Armored Division (still recovering from a catastrophic commitment at Herrlisheim) in reserve. De Lattre concurred and also agreed to assign the whole of the 5ème Division Blindée to the XXI Corps. The corps commander, Major General Frank W. Milburn, decided to continue using the 3rd Division to spearhead the attack with most of the 5ème Division Blindée to back up the tired American regiments. On the left wing, the IIème Corps d'Armée was to secure the northern flank.

Jean Paul found that the picture had been taken at the major road junction where the Route de Strasbourg (off the picture to the left) joins the Route de Sélestat on the right. The same petrol station was still in business when he took his comparison in the winter of 2003-4 although 'For Sale' notices were evident on the windows.

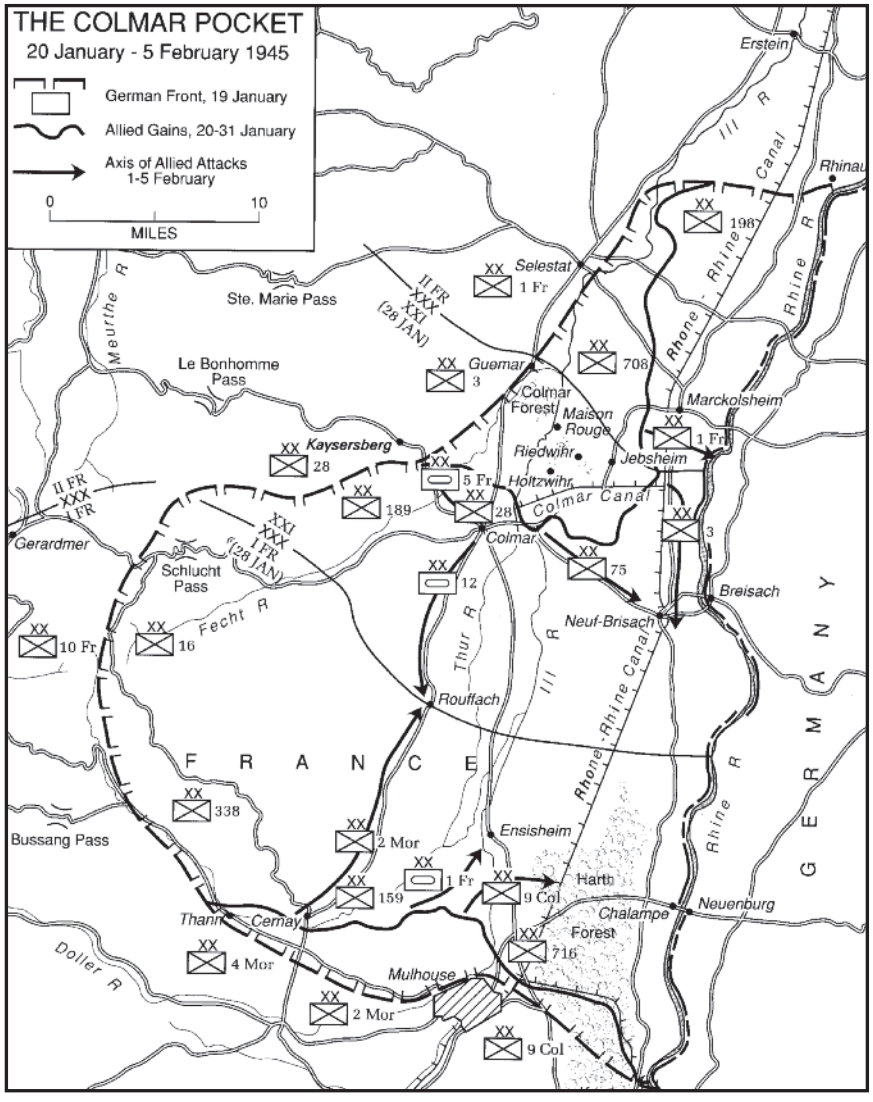
The odd pockets of resistance in the city and the suburbs were progressively being cleared and at 4 p.m. the French battle group reported having taken 250 prisoners. Some 25 of them are seen here being marched up the Avenue de la République. (ECPAD)

As early as January 25, Heeresgruppe G had concluded that holding the Colmar pocket was no longer important to the German defensive effort in the West and recommended that either the entire pocket should be abandoned or, at least, the northern extension at Erstein be evacuated and the forces used to strengthen the northern shoulder. On the night of January 28/29 Hitler finally agreed to the partial withdrawal in the north but still insisted that the pocket be defended as long as possible.

On January 29, Heeresgruppe Oberrhein was dissolved and SS-Oberstgruppenführer Paul Hausser took command of Heeresgruppe G, including all forces formerly assigned to Heeresgruppe Oberrhein. Reichsführer-SS Himmler was reassigned to a command on the Eastern Front (Heeresgruppe Weichsel commanding three armies on the Vistula front) and Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz, who had commanded Heeresgruppe G from December 22, was made commander of Heeresgruppe H in Holland.

Another time . . . but the same place! A low-lying winter sun gives superb light for our comparison in February 2003.

The US 12th Armored Division took over the advance southwards and in the early hours of February 5, its Combat Command A entered Rouffach. Here an M5 light tank has pulled up on the Place de la République. (USNA)



German intelligence in Alsace was faulty and it was only on January 30, when the 3rd Division had crossed the Colmar Canal, that the German command began to perceive that the Allied drive was headed directly for the bridge at Neuf-Brisach. On the night of the 30th, Heeresgruppe G specified to General Rasp of 19. Armee that his main mission was to 'assure the survival' of the pocket for as long as possible. He was authorised to withdraw most of his forces from the Vosges front, leaving only reconnaissance detachments to hold the mountain passes. Rasp in turn ordered the immediate evacuation of all forces in the Vosges and concentrated them on the northern and southern shoulders of the bridgehead, while sending what reinforcement he could to protect his two major bridge sites at Breisach and Neuenburg.

Inside the pocket, the situation was soon becoming confused with elements from the 16. Volksgrenadier-Division and the 189. and 338. Infanterie-Divisions mixed with those of the other divisions as well as with units of the 2. Gebirgs-Division which had begun arriving in the pocket sometime after the 20th. On February 1, in spite of standing orders to the contrary, General Rasp begun to move service troops and damaged equipment east of the Rhine. That evening Hitler's order to stand fast in the pocket arrived at Heeresgruppe G and was immediately passed on to Rasp by telephone. While these instructions remained unaltered to the end, from the 6th Rasp started to evacuate equipment over the Rhine by ferry or over the Neuenburg bridge while the bulk of the combat forces fell back on this same bridge.

'The 75th Infantry Division had begun moving into the 1ère Armée area on January 27', wrote the official US Army historians, 'and by the evening of the 31st started to relieve O'Daniel's 3rd Division regiments south of the Colmar Canal for the final push. Again O'Daniel attacked east and then south, first slipping the 30th Infantry behind the others and moving it east to the Rhône-Rhine Canal for a drive south with units of the 5ème Division Blindée. Next, with the arrival of the 75th Division on the battlefield, he transferred both the 7th and 15th Infantry

Left: **German pockets of resistance still held out in many places and it was not until 8 a.m., after two hours of disorganised fighting, that Rouffach was finally cleared by CCA and elements of the 4ème Division de Montagne Marocaine that had entered the town from the south. This lone prisoner surrendered to men of the 4ème Régiment de Spahis Marocains. (USNA)** *Right:* **This is Rue du Maréchal Joffre. Rue Poincaré lies behind the photographer.**

to the far side of the Rhône-Rhine Canal, turning them south as well. By February 3 elements of all three 3rd Division regiments were approaching Neuf-Brisach and the Germans began a last-ditch defence of the bridgehead with all available manpower. On the 5th, with the old fortress town nearly surrounded, the Germans started to evacuate the area and by noon of the following day, February 6, the entire sector was under Allied control.

'Inside the pocket the German defences around the city of Colmar had already collapsed. While the 3rd Division attacked toward Neuf-Brisach, first the attached 254th Infantry and then the regiments of the 28th Division (Major General Norman D. Cota) steadily pushed against the northern approaches to Colmar in the Kaysersberg valley. By February 2 Cota's units had cleared the city's suburbs against diminishing resistance, allowing units of the 5ème Division Blindée to drive into the heart of Colmar nearly unopposed. Immediately de Lattre agreed to commit the 12th Armored Division through the 28th Division for a drive south; two days later American armoured task forces, moving south along two parallel axes, met Ier Corps d'Armée elements at Rouffach during the early morning hours of February 5. By that date the bulk of Béthouart's southern forces had finally bypassed German emplacements around Ensisheim and, finding enemy defences crumbling elsewhere, raced to Rouffach from the south. The drives split the

A battle group of the 1ère Division Blindée then reached Rouffach from the south but when its commander, Chef d'Escadron de Berterèche de Menditte (left), met Brigadier General Riley F. Ennis (right) commanding CCA of the 12th Armored Division, Ennis pointed out that Rouffach lay within the XXI Corps sector of action, not that of the Ier Corps d'Armée. He therefore asked that the French combat command be moved beyond the boundary. The French commander immediately concurred and issued orders to resume the advance east using another route more to the south which ran through Munwiller. (USNA)

Left: **Meanwhile GIs of the 12th Armored Division grabbed the opportunity of the lull in the fighting to catch up with their mail. From the windows of their convent, nuns observe the joyful demonstrations at the liberation of their town.** *Right:* **Time has stood still at the junction between the Rue Poincaré on the right and the Rue Ris (left).**

Pushing from the south, Combat Command 3 of the 1ère Division Blindée cleared the western bank of the River Ill as far as Sainte-Croix-en-Plaine which lies some eight kilometres north-east of Rouffach and well to the north in the American sector. This picture of French troopers from CC3 was taken on February 3. (ECPAD)

Indicating that Colmar lies 17 kilometres away and Mulhouse 20 kilometres in the opposite direction, the road sign provided an easy guide to the location of the photograph: Meyenheim. This is the Grande Rue in front of the new town hall.

Prisoners being marched off in Meyenheim. During the advance, French forces had liberated a series of villages along the river but some, like Reguisheim, had to be bypassed. Their capture was achieved on the 5th. (ECPAD)

Left: **Combat Command B of the 12th Armored Division was late in reaching its allocated sector along the west bank of the Ill river and it was not until the morning of February 6 that all of Combat Command 3 had fulfilled its promise to move back behind the US XXI Corps boundary which had been established due east of Rouffach. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **After a long search, Jean Paul found that the picture of infantry dismounting from a tank had been taken on the Rue de la Gare in Meyenheim.**

Left: **However the tanks of the 1ère Division Blindée were held up from crossing the Ill until pontoon bridges had been constructed and it was February 7 before the first tanks of Combat Command 3 managed to get across. This is *Prague,* a Sherman M4A4 of the 2ème Régiment de Chasseurs d'Afrique.** *Right:* **Jean Paul discovered that this particular bridge had been built at Meyenheim. Today its permanent replacement taking the D3bis over the river lies just behind the photographer.**

In the meantime, in the north, the XXI Corps had crossed the Colmar Canal and pushed south-eastwards in the direction of Neuf-Brisach. The 75th Infantry Division had joined the operation from January 30 and the French 2ème Division Blindée from February 4, the latter taking over from the combat commands of the 5ème Division Blindée which then assembled at Colmar as 1ère Armée reserve. On February 5, while the 291st Infantry took Wolfgantzen, two kilometres north-west of Neuf-Brisach, the 289th Infantry secured Appenwihr, six kilometres to the west. A combat command of the 2ème Division Blindée then sped south through Hettenschlag to reach Dessenheim, five kilometres south of Neuf-Brisach. Late on February 5, the troops of the 15th Infantry reached the western ends of the road and rail bridges at Neuf-Brisach, both already blown up by the Germans. *Above:* **This Wirbelwind, a Flak tank mounting a quadruple 2cm AA gun on a PzKpfw IV chassis, had been abandoned at Hettenschlag, its crew probably taken by surprise at the sudden appearance of French tanks on the afternoon of February 5. (USNA)** *Right:* **A timeless comparison, the church having been untouched for the past 60 years.**

Left: **Pressing on south-westwards, the 2ème Division Blindée took Balgau, 12 kilometres north of Chalampé, on the afternoon of the 7th. The sign at this elaborate road-block set up at the western entrance of the town announced: 'Death to the destroyers of Europe'. (USNA)** *Right:* **Could this really be the same place 60 years on?**

The Germans destroyed the last Rhine bridge — the one between Chalampé and Neuenburg — at 8 a.m. on February 9. The forces of the Ier Corps d'Armée fighting to clear the shrinking German bridgehead heard the explosion and realised what had happened. At 11.30 a.m. the leading troops of the 9ème DIC reached the town just as the last Germans crossed the Rhine in small boats. *Left:* **Another propaganda message, this one claiming that when 'Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt demolish, Hitler builds up!'. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **The same wall survives at Bantzenheim, two kilometres west of Chalampé.**

Colmar pocket wide open. Between February 5 and 9, as the supporting American divisions redeployed northward, French forces finished cleaning out the pocket. In the north de Monsabert's forces (Général Aimé de Montsabert, the commander of IIème Corps d'Armée) swept the west side of the Rhine from Erstein to Marckolsheim, while in the west units of the new 10ème Division d'Infanterie and the 4ème Division de Montaigne Marocaine policed up the interior of the pocket.

'To the south, Béthouart directed his main effort against the last German bridgehead at Chalampé, using the 1ère Division Blindée and the 2ème Division d'Infanterie Marocaine and 9ème Division d'Infanterie Coloniale. Here German resistance remained fierce for a few days, but the French managed to penetrate across the Ill river on February 5, secure Ensisheim on the 6th and reach the Rhône-Rhine Canal by the 7th. There they were joined by Leclerc's armour on the 8th; the next morning, elements of the 9ème DIC reached the Rhine at Chalampé, forcing the Germans to destroy the remaining bridge at 8 a.m. This final act marked the end of the Colmar pocket and the German presence in upper Alsace as well.'

Hitler's decision to hold the pocket as long as possible, mainly for political reasons and probably personal esteem, had resulted in high losses for the 19. Armee. Precise German casualty reports are sparse, but it is estimated that thousands of men had been killed or wounded in Alsace. Non-combat casualties from the weather had also been high as the men had had to endure deep snow and freezing temperatures. One Heeresgruppe G report put the 19. Armee losses between January 20 and February 5 to 800 dead, 2,596 wounded and 3,129 missing. The late orders to evacuate had saved probably 10,000 troops of all types, no more, and at least a part of their artillery, anti-tank guns and vehicles, but over 17,000 men had been taken prisoner.

On the Allied side, the 6th Army Group staff estimated American casualties around 8,000 and French twice that number. About 500 Americans had been killed in action. The toll taken by the weather on the Allied forces was also very high, one third of the losses being from non-combat injuries.

The demolition of the last bridge across the Rhine was the final act in the battle for Alsace (also referred to in the history books as the Battle of the Colmar Pocket), and the 1ère Armée announced that the campaign officially ended at 8 a.m. on February 9. This picture of the wrecked railway bridge at Breisach was taken that same day as white phosphorous shells explode on pillboxes on the German bank of the Rhine. Having survived massive Allied bombing, it appears that German soldiers awarded this particular bridge an honorary Iron Cross! (USNA)

Left: **More Nazi propaganda, the message on the left claiming that 'Bolshevists and democrats are the accomplices of Jewry for the enslavement of peoples. That is why National Socialism fights unyieldingly for German liberty'. (ECPAD)** *Right:* **From Schlumbergerstrasse . . . to Rue Camille Schlumberger . . . Colmar . . . then . . . and now.**

On February 8, a victory parade took place in Colmar when Général de Lattre de Tassigny of the 1ère Armée made his official entry in the liberated city. Here honour guards of the 12th Armored Division (forefront) and the 28th Infantry Division (in the background) give acte de présence on the main square, the Place Rapp. (USNA)

Another celebration was held in the city on February 20 when Général de Lattre awarded 57 of the highest French decorations to American commanders. Among them were Major General John E. Dahlquist of the 36th Infantry Division, Major General John E. O'Daniel of the 3rd Infantry Division and Major General Roderick C. Allen of the 12th Armored Division. (USNA)

RENARD